

Zambelli, Elena (2016) 'Mirror on the wall, am I desirable at all?' : sex, pleasures and the market in postcolonial Italy. PhD Thesis. SOAS, University of London

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'Mirror on the wall, am I desirable at all?'

Sex, pleasures and the market in postcolonial Italy

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Thesis submitted for the degree of PhD in Gender Studies

2015

Centre for Gender Studies

SOAS, University of London

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Abstract of the thesis

This dissertation contributes to debates around women's subjectification in contemporary Western countries; contexts characterised by an increasingly sexualised culture, economic insecurity and xenophobia, and an upsurge in the feminist 'sex wars' (Chapkis, 1997: 11). In particular, it explores the ways in which sexuality, pleasure and work interrogate each other and differently impinge on women's subjectification and agency according to class and race. The case study is contemporary Italy, which was recently gripped by a wave of panic about sex, and maintains a position – standalone in Western Europe – in favour of a return to state-regulated prostitution and in opposition to same-sex unions. Processes of women's subjectification are heavily constrained by heteronormativity, compelling them to take on the position of either the chaste wife/mother or the sexually enticing but stigmatised 'whore'. This dissertation, therefore, looks at how Italian and migrant women navigate these roles through an exploration of the contradictory subject positions voiced by women working in different leisure, erotic and sex market niches: pole dance entrepreneurs and teachers, 'image girls', lap dancers, indoor and street sex workers.

Overall, this thesis argues that understanding women's display and use of sexuality, whether for pleasure and/or work, requires overcoming dichotomies juxtaposing sexual objectification and empowerment, dependence on a desiring male audience and autonomy, victimisation and choice. It argues that the position of radical feminists and abolitionists, that prostitution engenders a uniquely dire and unacceptable form of work-induced alienation, is flawed by heteronormative biases, and reproduces the class-based and racialised privileging of white Western women. Therefore, it shows that for many migrant women, pursuing dreams of social and/or spatial mobility and feeding their affective bonds, entails investing different blends of sex, care and love into their work; whether stigmatised as whores or praised as cheap carers, they express a form of resistance to an unwanted fate. Finally, the thesis argues for retrieving the affective and existential value of desirability, beyond its significance for gender relations of power.

Acknowledgments

Writing this dissertation has been a life-changing journey for me; a journey for which I mostly credit the women I met, interviewed, and established relations with throughout the research process. Their availability to share their stories, worries, desires, and angers enabled me to unsettle my own positioning, and weave bonds across multiple differences. My hope is that this research contributes to the wider struggle to erase stigmas on erotic and sex workers, and to detach pleasures from shame.

I am deeply grateful for the intellectual stimulation, support and care that my supervisors provided throughout this journey: Dr Ruba Salih, Dr Caroline Osella, and Prof Lynn Welchman. It is not flattery to say that they went above and beyond their duties in supporting me as a student and a person, kindly challenging me to push the boundaries of my knowledge and understanding, without making me feel intimidated by what lay, and still lies, ahead.

I would have not succeeded in this emotionally unsettling and consuming work had it not been for the love and care of my family and friends, who bore my estranged-ness without making me feel too undesirably brainy, or too bizarrely astray. My thanks go to my parents, Bruna Iori and Fortunato Zambelli, my sister Franca, and to women who, in different ways, helped me to navigate (sometimes) very stormy and dark waters: Concetta Paduanello, Elena Capelli, Erica Beuzer, Maria Ferrara and Sarah Alessandroni. In blending support and irony, genuine interest in my research and reflexivity, they helped me relationally pursue this otherwise deeply introspective journey into my own subjectification. They also kept reminding me to hold on to the (however fictive) boundary between myself and my research, my work and affectivity.

While 'I' am the author of this dissertation, my analysis and reflections were shaped by my relations with so many people. I cannot do justice to them through an exhaustive list; some provided support, others prompted an angered response, a cognitive dissonance, or a laughter that left me mumbling. Responsibility for the interpretation of these conversations and incidents is

mine, but their possibility arose through the relation that bonds us to one another, and that, for better or worse, left a meaningful trace.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

'Hi,' I said, smiling at the priest walking out of the Catholic parish, 'I'm looking for the Bertone family. Do you know where they live?'

I had long been looking for the house where Diana, a prodigious teenage pole dancer I saw perform at a local contest, lived with her mother Filomena. Driving amidst an array of cul-de-sacs set off the long, flat main road, I eventually decided to stop and continue my search on foot. The only parking place in sight was at the local parish, and in the stillness of a summertime afternoon, I knew my unauthorised entry would not go unnoticed; in fact, I was counting on it, as in such small villages clergymen often hold cartographic knowledge of all the local families (Garofalo 1956: 27; Cullen 2013: 37; Pollard 2008: 40).¹

'Whose family?' he asked with a furrowed brow. 'Bertone's,' I replied, 'they live at number 6154 on this street.' He shook his head in denial, 'I've never heard of them.' 'Oh,' I mumbled, wondering whether I was in the wrong place, 'can I still leave my car here while I have a look around?' 'Yes you can', he conceded, and walked back into the church. Looking for a landmark, I crossed the road to check the number of the large villa facing the church. It was 6154.

'We don't know anyone in the village,' Filomena said when I told her how I stumbled upon their house, 'we don't, and we are not that interested either, because there's a cultural abyss between us and them.' In her early fifties, Filomena is a retired fashion designer, a landlady renting out part of her family's villa to long-term tenants, and a mother of three. 'Our strategy has always been to cultivate our kids' talent,' Filomena said, commenting on her two older sons' migration to the US for higher education, 'our schools don't do it, so as parents we have to work harder.' Insulated in a village several kilometres from the nearest town, Filomena lamented that she had spent 'all these years working as a taxi driver', as she had spent much time driving her kids to school, activities and events while her husband, a film producer, frequently travelled for work. Pride mixed with sacrifice as she described how she cared for, and invested in, her daughter's future. 'Diana was born in this house', she said; her eyes locked

¹ Until today, even in bigger cities – such as Bologna, where I live – priests knock on the door of each household in their parish at least once a year; notably, to dispense Easter blessings in exchange for cash donations.

on Diana, who was chatting on her Smartphone all through what became an interview with her mother. 'Since she was a little child, she used to climb the trees in our garden, like a monkey!' Filomena exclaimed, as if implying that her daughter's pole dancing talent was predestined.

Diana's performance at the pole dance contest had been impressively acrobatic indeed. The lightness of her movements concealed the physical strength necessary to perform leverages and climbs; and she seemed uninterested in her audience, whom she never glanced at, nor was there any trace of innuendo. At school however, Diana was stigmatised for practicing pole dancing. 'One of the questions you sent us addressed our social milieu',² Filomena reminded me some time into her interview. 'Yes,' I said, 'I would like to know how it is for a young girl like Diana to practise pole dance in a society such as ours, which is a bit...' 'Bigot?' Filomena stated scornfully, concluding my sentence for me. 'Diana, please, tell her', she said turning to her daughter, who lifted her eyes from her Smartphone briefly to speak:

I don't care about these things, I go on. At school, I had a teacher who was very biased towards me and, as a consequence, my [female] classmates were also biased. In fact, my mother went to speak to the school headmistress about my pole dancing. She [the teacher] spoke about me in a bad way.

'The teacher told her, "Isn't this what prostitutes do?"' Filomena continued, frowning at the association of pole dance and adult entertainment. 'Did she really say this?! In front of her schoolmates?' I asked astonished. 'I swear,' Filomena replied with disdain, 'the headmistress asked me if we wanted Diana to change classes, but I refused. She was integrated already.' 'So, with whom can you share your hobby?' I asked Diana, hoping for a more welcoming attitude toward a practice that she was passionately and successfully cultivating. 'All of my friends know I pole dance, and some came to watch me practising at home,' she said, indicating at a home practice pole fixed in the next room, which had been left by her brother's girlfriend when they moved to the US. 'But most of the

² The question is part of the grid I used to ask for my interviewees' prior consent (see Ethics and Annex II).

time they see me dancing in the street, on streetlights. I do flags.’³ ‘Wow!’ I exclaimed in amazement; it was indeed unusual for a girl to possess such muscular strength. ‘And so you pole dance...in the street?’ I asked Diana thoughtfully. I later discovered that pole dance had become quite a widespread form of urban street dance (see for example: Dawn 2012; MrMiks81 2012; PolestarsUK 2008). At the time, however, I was disturbed by the implication of the spatial overlapping of such a street dance – performed by a teenager – with street sex work, which is often negotiated around streetlights. However undue, such association must have crossed the mind of Diana’s mother as well, who replied to my question in her daughter’s place. ‘Well, no, [she performs] just a flag here and there, to show off’, Filomena said, taking back the reins of the conversation for the remainder of the interview.

Diana and Filomena’s conversation points to the transformation of an erotic dance, performed by women in male-patronised strip clubs (i.e. lap dance), into a leisure and fitness activity that overwhelmingly appeals to middle-class women (i.e. pole dance). Definitions of this latter vary based on the emphasis placed on its erotic, artistic and sporty connotations. The first recorded pole dance performance occurred in Oregon (USA) in 1968, and its practise spread across Canadian strip clubs throughout the 1980s (Holland 2010: 38). By the 2000s, pole dance started being marketed in the US, UK and Australia as a fitness and leisure activity for women, gaining widespread commercial success (Whitehead and Kurz 2009: 226; Holland and Attwood 2009: 165; Owen 2012: 87);⁴ but, as I describe later in this chapter, in Italy it started several years later. UK scholars define this practice as a form of ‘erotic performance’ combining acrobatic tricks ‘around a vertical *pole*’ (Holland and Attwood 2009: 165); at the first Italian Pole Dance Conference in 2013, on the other hand, pole dance was

³ Performing the ‘flag’ is a physically demanding exercise. The athlete has to hold onto a vertical object (i.e. the pole) and maintain her/his body horizontal to the ground, as if s/he was a flag on a pole. Pole dancers learn performing a variety of flags, as listed in the Pole Dance Dictionary (*ibid.*).

⁴ From its Western cradle (Whitehead and Kurz 2009: 227), pole dance is now practised in many parts of the world, and for example became ‘something of a craze in China’s gyms’ (Danlin 2013).

defined as ‘an acrobatic and sensual dance that uses a *perch* as a scenic object for leverages, leaps, figures, choreographies’ (D’Amico 2014b).⁵ The uneasy accommodation of strip club imagery, the origination point of pole dancing, underlies this terminological difference: the term ‘pole’ evokes this association more directly. In such a context, a teenage girl practising an activity that has emerged from adult entertainment conveys the broader cultural pressures on women to cultivate heterosexual appeal. Nevertheless, as Diana’s performance conveyed and her words above portend, the underlying meanings of women’s choice to practise pole dance can exceed the erotic stimulation of an audience; for example, to feel and display one’s physical strength and acrobatic skills. Yet, Diana’s teacher insinuated that she wilfully mimics a socially despised group of women (i.e. ‘prostitutes’), the Bertone family seems to be enwrapped in bizarre social invisibility, even though they live in front of the local parish, and Filomena was concerned by the association with erotic and sex workers implicitly evoked by her daughter’s street pole dancing. These examples clearly show how women who display sexuality, whether for pleasure or work, are forcefully stigmatised in contemporary Italy.

The commercial boom of pole dancing reflects how leisure is increasingly infused with ‘pleasure, sexuality and the erotic’ in contemporary Western countries (Brents and Hausbeck, 2010: 11), to the point that ‘mainstream culture and the adult commercial sex industry are, in some important ways, converging’ (*ibid.*: 9). This dissertation analyses such convergences, as well as the ways in which sexuality, pleasure and work interrogate each other and impinge on women’s subjectification and agency. As such, I point to the tensions underlying the position of ‘woman’ within heteronormativity, as she must embody one of the two projections of men’s split sexuality (Grosz 1990: 129): the chaste, asexual wife and mother or the whore, who is intensely desired and despised for her sexuality (hereafter: the wife/whore or good/bad women binary). In a context characterised by the sexualisation of culture (McNair 2002; Attwood 2006) and an upsurge in the feminist ‘sex wars’ (Chapkis 1997: 11), women who capitalise on their heterosexual desirability are simultaneously

⁵ My emphasis in both quotes.

glamorised and stigmatised as whores and/or (un)witting sexual objects for male pleasure and consumption. At the same time, women's use of sexuality as a socioeconomic asset occurs within a context also characterised by increasing economic precarity (Berlant 2010a), deepening inequalities within and across nations (Piketty 2014), and rising xenophobia (see for example: Ghosh 2011; Gunduz 2010). Therefore, women's agency unfolds amidst hierarchies of social and economic value and worth that establish rank on the basis of gender, sexuality, class, race, and other positionings.

This dissertation seeks to, broadly, contribute to feminist scholarship on sexualisation and prostitution/sex work through a discussion of how women's display and use of sexuality interrogate the dichotomies such scholarship relies upon, that juxtapose women's sexual objectification and empowerment, dependence on a desiring male audience and autonomy, oppression and liberation, victimisation and choice. Such scholarship mainly discusses women's sexuality from within a heteronormative framework, and primarily through the lens of its contribution to challenging or reproducing women's subordination. Here, I argue that prioritising gender over other axes of difference and hierarchies of power reflects white Western women and second wave Western feminist assumptions and priorities (see for example: Yeğenoğlu 1998; Mohanty 1988), as well as downplays both the significance of economic inequality and racism in women's lives and the dialectics between heteronormativity and homophobia. Hence, this thesis interweaves class, race and sexuality in analysing women's agency, their subjectivities, and the processes affecting their subjectification.

The notion of respectability is central to women's negotiating their display and use of sexuality in defiance of prevailing chastity norms. As I show throughout this dissertation, most women I met and interviewed negotiated their performance of a sexier femininity in public, and/or the sale of erotic and sexual services to men, by recalling – more or less explicitly and contradictorily – the symbolic protection encapsulated by the position of the respectable feminine subject. Respectability, however, is a thick and polyvalent concept, dense with

gendered, sexualised, class-based and racialised assumptions (Skeggs 1997; Mosse 1996). By highlighting the contradictions between Italian and migrant women's claims of respectability as they engage in practices opposing chastity norms, I show how such women navigate the mutually exclusive roles that heteronormativity prescribes in the context of economic precarity and inequality, racialised desire and despise, mobility constraints and gendered, racialised employability patterns (Brah 1993a, 1993b).

My main argument here is that the meanings women invest in their display and use of sexuality, whether for pleasure and/or work, cannot be gauged simply by their impact on gender relations of power. Such meanings also reflect the importance of class and race in women's subjectivities and agency, as well as the relationality intrinsic to desire. In the background, the sexualisation of culture (McNair 2002; Attwood 2006) and increasing economic precarity are impinging on the normative binary that establishes hierarchies of value and worth among women on the basis of sexuality; however, such hierarchies continue to position women differently on the basis of class, colour, and position towards the nation state where they were born, work and/or reside.

In the next section, I provide an overview of the chosen case study, which I discuss in more depth later in this introductory chapter.

Italy: women's respectability amidst sex scandals, nostalgia for the lost brothel and homophobia

My case study is contemporary Italy, a country that was recently swept by a media centric wave of sex scandals involving older, top level, male politicians/businessmen and young Italian or migrant women, who exchanged their 'erotic capital' (Hakim 2011) for TV work, a seat in elective political bodies, or money. At the time, the public space became saturated with tales and images of these young women, who were simultaneously glamorised and stigmatised as whores and/or unwitting sexual objects for male consumption. A panoptical arose in parallel, a disciplinary gaze (Foucault 1977) concerned with policing women's morality. In this period of heightened concerns over women's

sexuality, the forcefulness of the heteronormative binary constraining women's subjectification became more visible. Significantly, although overlooked by mainstream public debates, such concerns went hand-in-hand with the country's standalone positions: in favour of a return to state-regulated prostitution, amidst an established European Union (EU) consensus on the criminalisation of sex customers and intermediaries (i.e. the 'Swedish model'),⁶ and against the legalisation of same-sex unions.

Therefore, in this dissertation I trace the ethnographic threads that contribute to explaining not only what I characterise as contemporary Italy's nostalgia for the 'lost brothel', but also the country's parallel and complementary institutional resistance to the recognition of same-sex unions. Indeed, disentangling the factors contributing to the construction of 'national heterosexuality' (Berlant and Warner 1998: 553) in the country cradling the Roman Catholic Church, whose global seat its capital hosts, sheds light on the functionality of prostitution shared by both Italian nationalism and the Catholic Church.

Having introduced the general and specific contexts within which this dissertation is situated, and outlined its main argument in relation to the scholarship it aims to contribute to, in the next section I discuss the thesis's conceptual framework and how it forged my research questions.

Conceptual framework: women's heteronormative subjectification between sex, pleasure and the market

Choice vs. oppression in neoliberal times

The breast-endowed pole dancing robots which were on display at the world's largest information technology fair (Millar 2014), aptly encapsulate the

⁶ The Act Prohibiting the Purchase of Sexual Services was first introduced in Sweden in 1999 amidst a range of measures on violence against women (Sanders et al. 2009: 87; see also MacKinnon 2011: 275). In the EU, this Act is currently enforced in Sweden, Norway, Iceland and Northern Ireland; in addition, measures criminalising either the sale or purchase of sexual services are being discussed in France and Scotland (TAMPEP International Foundation 2015) and are under consideration in Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Ireland, and Romania (Grimley 2015).

contemporary entanglement of sexualisation, heteronormativity and the market, which constitutes the background of this dissertation. Here, heteronormativity is signalled through the gendering of robots as women and, albeit implicitly, the audience as male (Mulvey 1975).⁷ This gendered binary juxtaposes the woman-viewed/man-viewer positions and is inflected by class, as it corresponds to the division between workers and consumers. Moreover, the provision of such 'entertainment' in the specific setting of a hi-tech trade fair highlights the multiple functions and meanings of sex in contemporary Western countries. In fact, the robots' camera-heads evoke a Foucaultian conception of sex as a tool of power, discipline and surveillance (Foucault 1977; Foucault 1990). In this regard, Beatriz Preciado recently suggested that the ultimate form of labour that capitalism appropriates is what she defined as 'orgasmic force', i.e. 'the potential for excitation inherent in every material molecule' (2013: 42). This 'orgasmic force' ignites consumers' sexual excitation and, accordingly, binds them to consume more. Overall, as contemporary capitalism is fuelled by the promise of pleasure through consumption (Appadurai 1996: 82-83), sex is simultaneously a commodity, a market driver, and a tool of 'biopolitics' (Foucault et al. 2003).

Within such a context, as suggested by Diana and Filomena's conversation opening this dissertation, girls⁸ and women's leisure and/or fitness practise of an acrobatic evolution of an erotic dance, which is performed by women in male-patronised strip clubs, is riddled with ambivalences. For several feminist scholars and writers, pole dancing and similar practices (e.g. Burlesque) reproduce women's gendered oppression and subordination to men, although disguised as a form of sexual liberation (see for example: Lamb et al. 2013; Owen 2012; Walter 2011). Other scholars (see for example: Whitehead and Kurz 2009; Holland 2010; Holland and Attwood 2009) situate pole dancing's

⁷ I discuss Laura Mulvey's concept of the 'male gaze' in Chapter 2, in relation to my analysis of pole dance as a 'discipline'.

⁸ A few years ago, the UK supermarket giant Tesco commercialised – in its online toys and games section – a '£49.97 Peekaboo Pole Dancing kit [including] an extendable pole, frilly garter, a DVD to demonstrate sexy dance moves and fake money to reward budding dancers' (Rouse 2010). Enraged citizens mobilised and the kit was eventually removed (Walter 2011: 237).

contemporary Western boom at the intersection of the 'sexualisation of mainstream culture' (McNair 2002: 12) and 'postfeminism'.

'Sexualisation' is a broad label used by media and cultural studies scholars to discuss the increasing visibility, accessibility and consumption of recreational sex in Western countries (see for example: McNair 2002; Attwood 2006). The use of such term has been rising since the 1980s, and suggests that mainstream culture is embedded with sexist imageries that jeopardise young women's self-confidence and safety 'by blurring the crucial line between "normal" women and the "unhealthy" lifestyle of strippers or prostitutes' (Duschinsky 2013: 258). Some feminist writers use the term 'raunch culture' (Levy 2006: 26) to indicate the saturation of sexually objectified women, heralded as role models (*ibid.*: 196; see also: Walter 2011).

Postfeminism is a loose and conflictingly defined term (Gill and Scharff 2011: 4; see also: Genz and Brabon 2009: 5). However, several Western feminist scholars use it to describe, and criticise, the contemporary re-signification of second wave feminism's key words – such as empowerment and choice – in individualistic and consumerist terms; a twist considered pivotal in enabling the concealment and perpetuation of structural patterns of women's subordination to men (McRobbie 2009). Underneath such debates on the meanings of women's sexualisation lies the tension between individual agency and structures. More specifically, these debates query whether a woman's display or use of her heterosexual desirability, within a persistently sexist order, can ever qualify as a free choice. In this vein, Rosalind Gill argued that 'the notion of choice has become a postfeminist mantra', overriding critiques of the context within which women make choices:

The idea that women are 'pleasing themselves' is heard everywhere: 'women choose to model for men's magazines', 'women choose to have cosmetic surgery to enhance the size of their breasts' [...] Of course, at one level, such claims have some truth: some women do make 'choices' like this. However, they do not do so in conditions of their own making, and to account for such decisions using only a discourse of free choice is to oversimplify both in terms of analysis and political response. (2009: 106-107)

Contemporary feminist debates on women's sexualisation represent a continuation of the feminist 'sex wars' (Jolly, Cornwall, and Hawkins 2013: 2) that, since the late 1970s, have divided Western feminists over 'the role of sexuality in women's liberation and oppression' (Chapkis 1997: 11).⁹ In a polarised confrontation, one side argues that women are empowered through seizing control over the economic value of their heterosexual desirability, which Catherine Hakim termed 'erotic capital' (2011). The opposing side, on the other hand, considers such women to have become men's sexual objects more or less (un)wittingly. Within such debates, 'the prostitute thus comes to function as both the most literal of sexual slaves and as the most subversive of sexual agents within a sexist social order' (Chapkis 1997: 12). In recent years, these debates have re-ignited also in relation to the legal disciplining of prostitution/sex work,¹⁰ with one camp demanding the adoption of the Swedish model to abolish what it considers a uniquely oppressive and alienating practice (hereafter 'abolitionists'), and the opposite camp, which is composed of sex worker activists and allies, advocating for the decriminalisation of sex work (TAMPEP International Foundation 2015).¹¹

However, the wider social context within which these debates are situated has changed remarkably. This is, for example, well-attested by mainstream economists, who suggest that Western policy makers should normalise commercial sex due to the fact that, for many women and men, it constitutes 'a personal choice', a form of freelancing 'like in other labour market' (The

⁹ I discuss the feminist sex wars in depth in Chapters 3 and 5.

¹⁰ Throughout this dissertation, I use the term 'prostitution' when reporting the position of abolitionists and discussing Italy's prostitution law prior to decriminalisation in 1958 (see Chapter 4). The term 'prostitute' was still used by some of the Italian sex workers I interviewed, and it is part of the name of the first sex workers' organization in Italy i.e. Comitato per i diritti civili delle prostitute (The Committee for Prostitutes' Civil Rights). In all other circumstances I use 'sex work' and 'sex worker'; these terms were coined in the 1980s by activists wishing to emphasise the work vs. sexual morality dimension, thereby contributing to diminishing stigma and pushing forward an agenda for sex workers' work and human rights (Koken, 2010).

¹¹ Lately, Amnesty International voted in favour of developing and adopting a policy on the decriminalisation of sex work (Amnesty International 2015), igniting a row between a range of women's groups and celebrities (Grimley 2015).

Economist 2014), and could contribute to increasing a country's GDP¹² (Burgen 2014; O'Connor 2014).

The plausibility and relative authoritativeness of these policy recommendations are grounded in the contemporary cultural hegemony of 'neoliberalism': a term which is by now loosely defined (see for example: Newman 2013: 205; Cornwall, Gideon, and Wilson 2008: 2; Rosalind Gill and Scharff 2011: 5), but broadly indicates a politics of diminishing state intervention, privatisation of welfare, and promotion of 'individualised, self-interested market activity informed by rational choice' (Baker 2008: 54). A key discursive pillar of neoliberalism is that anything can be commodified, including one's own body, 'whole or in parts' (Scheper-Hughes 2001). Such statement, hence, suggests the normalisation of trade in body organs, fluids, cells (e.g. kidneys, sperm, eggs, etc.), and embodied sexual practices (e.g. surrogacy, prostitution/sex work), begging the question as to whether there exists something that should not be for sale (see for example: Sandel 2009; Phillips 2011). Opening/expanding these markets in body parts and sexual practices, however, is reliant on their transformation into objects and practices of contractual exchange (see for example: Pateman 2002; 1988), and, more subtly, on an incitement for individuals to become entrepreneurs of their bodies' exchangeable value. As I discuss in the next section, one form of such incitement is highlighting the profitability of a woman's own heterosexual desirability.

Women's subjectification: gendered stigmas, erotic capital and abjection

Within a context characterised by the deep entanglement of sex, pleasure and the market, a person's capacity to entice others can be conceptualised and exchanged as a socioeconomic asset. Indeed, Catherine Hakim theorised it as a form of 'erotic capital':

a nebulous but crucial combination of beauty, sex appeal, skills of self-presentation and social skills – a combination of physical and social attractiveness which makes some men and women agreeable company and

¹² Gross Domestic Product: a measure used to calculate and compare countries' economic performance.

colleagues, attractive to all members of their society and especially to the opposite sex. (Hakim 2011: 1)

Such concept posits that men's supposedly naturally higher sexual drive makes women's heterosexual desirability and availability a scarcer and pricier good (*ibid.*: 47). Accordingly, women are deemed to be best positioned to take advantage of their erotic capital, and indeed Hakim praises the sale of erotic and sexual services as women's most paid, cost-effective and empowering job.¹³

The concept of erotic capital is rooted in the gender dimorphism structuring and reproducing heteronormativity. Heteronormativity, in fact, requires a dyad of a man and a woman bound to one another through the naturalisation of heterosexual desire.¹⁴ This complementary gender binary's cumulative and performative repetition over time and space results in the normalisation, and normativity, of heterosexuality (Wiegman 2006: 94; see also: Butler 1990). Here, gender difference and inequality are determined biologically, notably by the possession/lack of the penis (Moore 2007: 95). Lack of a penis simultaneously defines a 'woman' and deprives her of the power the penis is, however arbitrarily, symbolically associated with (*ibid.*: 100). Naturally castrated, woman wishes to access the power that 'man' holds as the bearer of the penis, or phallus (Grosz 1990: 71). To this end, she enters into a 'masquerade', i.e. she develops 'a number of reactive strategies [...] to ensure that, even if she doesn't *have* the phallus, she may *become* the phallus, the object of desire for another [...] a love-object for him' (*ibid.*: 132).

On the other hand, man needs woman to confirm his masculinity, as he can only construct this latter through the reiteration of his heterosexual desire for her (Berlant 2012: 58). Yet, as a consequence of the Oedipal complex – a phase in the development of the child, the successful outcome of which is the heterosexual orientation of his/her desire – the sexuality of the male infant

¹³ She reports that earnings 'are anywhere between two to forty times higher than a woman could otherwise achieve in alternative jobs open to her, at her educational level' (2011: 188), and that all (women) erotic and sex workers acquire more self-confidence and 'autonomy' (*ibid.*: 190).

¹⁴ This is, in Judith Butler's words, the 'heterosexual matrix', wherein the naturalisation of heterosexual desire 'requires and regulates gender as a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term' (Butler 1990: 31).

comes to be fundamentally split. In fact, the compulsory sublimation of his incestuous sexual desire for his mother occurs amidst an ambivalent aura of desire and despise. He experiences her as

both virginal, pure, noble, sexless (as a consequence of his repression of his own sexual wishes about her), and a whore, the result of his realization that, long before his birth, the mother has already been unfaithful to him (with the father). (Grosz 1990: 129)

In adult life, man manages such ambivalence by ‘embodying its elements in separate “types” of women, either virgin or whore, subject or object, asexual or only sexual’; he reserves ‘asexual admiration’ to the first, ‘while he is sexually attracted to, yet morally or socially contemptuous of, the second’ (*ibid.*). Normative heterosexuality, therefore, requires women to inhabit one of these two mutually exclusive positions, embodying the male-projected split of women’s maternal and sexual functions, which entails a trade-off between a socially valued (i.e. respectable) status for sexuality.

Women’s heteronormative subjectification, hence, would seem to be both bound by and reproducing this narrow and constraining binary. However, as I show throughout this dissertation, this binary’s normativity is being encroached upon by both the glamour surrounding contemporary ‘striptease culture’ (McNair 2002) and increasing economic precarity, which, as Lauren Berlant suggests, is inducing ‘everyone [to turn into] a hustler’ (2010a). In this pursuit, I include a continuum in this dissertation of practices and jobs where Italian and migrant women, however differently, display and use their heterosexual desirability, whether for pleasure and/or work.

There are several ethnographies on women living in Western countries who sell erotic and/or sexual services to men,¹⁵ and two seminal, multi-sited ethnographies on women working in different erotic and sex market niches (Chapkis 1997; Bernstein 2007). These ethnographies, however, focus almost

¹⁵ For example: strippers and exotic dancers in strip clubs (Colosi 2012; Brooks 2010; Price-Glynn 2010; Egan 2006), professional dominatrices (Lindemann 2012), and sex workers (Day 2007).

exclusively on the occupational aspects of these jobs, and do not address processes of women's subjectification.

My study takes a somewhat different tack, as the analytic site at the core of my investigation is the contemporary, fast-paced commercialisation of pole dancing for leisure and fitness. I analyse the meanings that women invest in their consumption of this practice through the lens of 'abjection' (Kristeva 1982). According to Kristeva, a subject seeks to achieve autonomy and individuation expelling elements that s/he considers undesirable, thereby marking her/his borders. 'How can I be without a border?' (*ibid.*: 4), she asks. And yet this boundary-making is always unstable, precarious:

abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it – on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger. (*ibid.*: 9-10)

Abjection, therefore, describes an ambivalent process of subjectification blending 'judgment and affect [...] condemnation and yearning' (*ibid.*). Hence, my premise is that pole dancing partly highlights women's ambivalent desire to heal the male-projected split at the core of their heteronormative subjectification (Grosz 1990: 129) by entering the field of their abject feminine other, i.e. the whore. Accordingly, I use the term 'pleasure' to indicate leisure activities, such as pole dancing, that are infused with the relational pleasures of being recognised as a woman who unashamedly displays her desire and ability to be sexually desirable in the eyes of a (more or less anonymous) male audience.¹⁶

Italy constitutes a particularly illustrative case study for this investigation, as the forcefulness of the wife/whore binary is particularly intense in this context and exacerbated by the influence of the Catholic Church; a point I return to later in this introduction. Furthermore, the commercialisation of pole dancing occurred late in Italy vis-à-vis other Western countries, such as the UK. The

¹⁶ Note that I am not saying the pleasure to show sexual availability, but of being seen and recognised as a sexually enticing and desirable woman. Hence, I am referring to the pleasures intrinsic to the performance and embodiment of desirability, regardless of any potentially ensuing shift from the realm of fantasy to its enactment and consumption.

following table (Table 1) shows the geographical distribution of pole dance schools and courses in Italy two years after I began my fieldwork (September 2012); at that time, courses only ran in a handful of cities and specialised schools.¹⁷

Table 1. Region-based distribution of pole dance schools and courses in Italy, September 2014.

| Region | No. | Region | No. |
|----------------|-----|---|-----|
| Lombardy | 29 | Campania | 5 |
| Lazio | 19 | Liguria | 4 |
| Emilia Romagna | 18 | Friuli Venezia Giulia, Marche, Puglia (each) | 3 |
| Veneto | 14 | Sardinia | 2 |
| Piedmont | 12 | Trentino Alto Adige, Abruzzi, Calabria (each) | 1 |
| Tuscany | 10 | Val d'Aosta, Umbria, Sicily, Molise, Basilicata | 0 |
| Total: 125 | | | |

In such a rapidly evolving situation, the assemblage of a marketing strategy promoting women's consumption of such an activity, which entails mimicking the aesthetics and movements of their abjects (i.e. lap dancers, as metonyms of the whore), touched upon the core norms and processes disciplining women's heteronormative subjectification. Hence, at the time of my fieldwork, pole dancing represented a 'liminal stage' (Turner 1985), wherein these tensions became more visible. As I argue, the profitability of pole dancing partially reflects women's unease within the rigid and mutually exclusive roles that heteronormativity prescribes. In addition, such profitability also shows women's desire to, if not challenge these roles directly, at least negotiate their

¹⁷ I drew this table based on data that pole dance entrepreneurs and teachers publicly advertise through the *Pole Dance Italy* blog (Pole Dance Italy 2014).

positioning more fluidly, partaking in the powerful, sexual aura emanating from their feminine abject. However, such a move entails the risk of, like this abject, being harshly stigmatised for displaying and using sexuality.

Indeed, women's subjectification is heavily constrained by two gendered and sexualised stigmas, which, as I show throughout this dissertation, sometimes overlap and are inflected by class and race. As conceptualised by Gail Pheterson, the 'whore stigma' is attributed to women selling erotic and sexual services, women who take sexual initiative, and/or women who are 'dressed to attract male desire' (1993: 46). The whore is simultaneously desired for her sexuality and despised for her promiscuity; she is foiled by the respectable, asexual wife and mother, who remains chastely confined in domesticity. What I define as the 'objectification stigma', on the other hand, arises from the feminist sex wars' debates on the meaning of women's sexuality along a dichotomy juxtaposing women's gendered oppression and liberation. More precisely, this stigma stems from radical feminist and abolitionist assumptions that women who display and/or capitalise on their heterosexual desirability have become sexual objects for male pleasure and consumption. The objectification stigma functions as a tautology, positing that women's objectified status is both derived from and entails their lack of subjectivity (MacKinnon 2011), thereby disqualifying 'objectified' women's voices as expressions of their 'internalized oppression' (Bartky 1990).¹⁸

As I show throughout this dissertation, most women I interviewed negotiated their performance of sexiness and/or sale of erotic capital by appealing to the symbolic, albeit ambivalent, protection encapsulated in the position of the respectable feminine subject. Respectability, however, is a concept that speaks to multiple discourses and audiences, and relies on the construction of a dis-respectable, abject other. At an initial level, a woman's respectability signals her chastity and allegiance to heteronormative, male-defined norms establishing the proper use and display of women's sexuality. However, from the eighteenth

¹⁸ I discuss this key concept in Chapter 2, in relation to women's subjectification amidst objectification and empowerment.

century onwards, during the political and economic ascendancy of the bourgeoisie, 'respectability' crystallised in a middle class ideology of 'distinction' (Bourdieu 1984) reliant on the abjection of some social groups – and especially the working class, prostitutes, and colonised peoples - who were despised but necessary to Western industrial imperialism (McClintock 1995: 72). Therefore, I include subjects abjectified by these interlocking, multi-faceted stigmas in this dissertation: Italian and migrant women, and male-to-female (M2F) transgender, all of whom sell different blends of emotional, erotic and/or sexual services to men, notably as lap dancers, image girls, and street or indoor sex workers.

Having outlined my conceptual framework, in the following section I articulate my research questions.

Research questions

This dissertation investigates processes of women's subjectification within persistently heteronormative Western contexts. Such contexts are also characterised by an increasingly sexualised culture, economic precarity and inequality, which affect women differently according to their class and race, among other positionings. Therefore, the thesis interrogates the interplay of gender, sexuality, class and race in women's articulation of their subjectivities and agency by foregrounding the ambivalent tension between desire and fear, pleasure and pain, dependence and independence intrinsic to the relational constitution of subjects. Specifically, my research questions are as follows:

- Can 'woman' reconcile the seemingly opposing goals of heterosexual desirability and autonomy? How?
- What othering processes underlie, and are reproduced through, women's articulation of their subjectivities in anticipation of, and in response to, the gendered stigmas affecting their heteronormative subjectification?
- How does the interplay of sexualisation, economic precarity, and xenophobia impinge on women's agency? And what hierarchies among women does it re-produce?

In the next section, I delve deeper into the reasons why contemporary Italy presents a relevant and interesting context for investigating these questions.

Italy: Sexgate, the respectable woman and/as the respectable nation, and the Catholic Church

When I started designing my research in late 2011, mainstream public debate in Italy did not convey heightened concerns for the sexualisation of young women or the plight of ‘prostituted people’ – as abolitionists define them (MacKinnon 2011). On the contrary, amidst an established EU consensus on the adoption of the Swedish model, Italy discretely maintained a position in favour of a return to state-regulated prostitution (hereafter ‘regulationism’);¹⁹ an approach it abandoned less than sixty years ago in favour of decriminalisation.²⁰ Such position was even more surprising when considered against the heightened concerns over women’s sexual behaviour and morality, which had saturated public debate and media throughout the last years of Silvio Berlusconi’s premiership.

In fact, from 2009 until his unseating at the end of 2011, the prime minister was at the centre of a torrent of sex scandals in both his political capacity and as a private citizen (see for example: Dominijanni 2011b; Repubblica 2009; Repubblica 2010); I refer to this period as ‘Sexgate’.²¹ It first began with ‘Velinagate’²² – i.e. the clamour raised by the premier’s inclusion of politically

¹⁹ In 2014, the EU Committee on Women’s Rights and Gender Equality voted in favor of adopting the Swedish model, as proposed by the ‘Report on sexual exploitation and prostitution and its impact on gender equality’ (i.e. the ‘Honeyball Report’); however, as I will show in Chapter 4, none of the Italian MPs participated to the vote (Committee on Women’s Rights and Gender Equality 2014).

²⁰ I discuss Italy’s legal disciplining of prostitution/sex work in Chapter 4.

²¹ Italian journalists’ use of the term ‘Sexgate’ establishes a parallel with the impeachment of Bill Clinton for his sexual relationship with Monica Lewinsky. My use the term, however, extends beyond the political and legal implications of Berlusconi’s sexual behaviour and indicates a specific historical period (i.e. 2009-2011) characterised by heightened public debates and concerns around sex and morality.

²² The term ‘velina’ was coined during fascism and denoted the official dispatches sent by the Ministry of Popular Culture to media outlets as dictates for news broadcasts. At the end of the 1980s, Berlusconi’s TV channels launched a satirical and iconic TV programme (Striscia la Notizia (The news slithers)), (Recchia 1988)), which introduced the figure of the ‘velina’: a young and sexy showgirl performing short dance breaks before silently handing the news over to two male presenters. In time, the meaning of the term broadened to include the increasing

inexperienced but alluring women candidates on his party's 2009 European Parliamentary elections list (Ventura 2009). In the subsequent two years, Berlusconi emerged as a bulimic consumer of erotic and sexual services provided by women purposefully invited to his private parties.²³ When one of Berlusconi's middlemen, a male Italian entrepreneur, was indicted for aiding and abetting prostitution, he blackmailed the prime minister (Giannini 2011; Bartocci 2011; Huffington Post 2014). The judicial investigation that followed highlighted the widespread 'system of economic, political and moral corruption', wherein women figured as bribes and gifts exchanged amongst male entrepreneurs and politicians bargaining over the allocation of work contracts (Dominijanni 2010). However, except for a group of leftist Italian feminists (Boccia et al. 2009), mainstream politicians and commentators shied away from criticising what they considered, and framed as, the premier's sphere of privacy (Tiscali 2010), and stigmatised instead the women who bargained their erotic capital for work, status, and/or money (see for example: Press 2009; n.m. 2011; Sarzanini 2011). Escorts, show girls, *ragazze immagine* (image girls),²⁴ and *veline*²⁵ were all lumped together under the label of promiscuous, vain, and greedy woman, i.e. the whore. Such widespread stigmatisation is encapsulated in a blog post significantly titled *Le altre donne* (The Other Women), written by the then woman director of an iconic leftist newspaper:²⁶

I observe the girls who, these days, go in and out of police headquarters: they carry designer bags as big as suitcases, Manolo Blanick shoes, gigantic sunglasses that cost as much as renting a flat. It is to own these [objects] that they spend nights dressed up as nurses giving and receiving fake injections by an old billionaire obsessed with his virility. They think that this is what it means to have luck [...] because this is what they saw and heard, what the ruling power

number of women building, or aspiring to build, a career in show business by relying on their sexual allure (Gandini 2009; see also: Willson 2011: 303). For critics of TV-driven consumerism and sexism, *veline* represent an emblem of the country's cultural and political decay (see for example: Zanardo 2011; Gregorio 2011).

²³ Silvio Berlusconi owns luxury residences all over Italy, but it was specifically the parties in his Milan residence that most attracted the media's voyeuristic gaze. Such parties were called 'Arcore parties' or 'Arcore nights'. Some of my interviewees also used these terms; to ensure consistency with their popular use, I also use these terms.

²⁴ See the dedicated section later in this Chapter.

²⁵ See note n.18 in this Chapter.

²⁶ Concita de Gregorio was the then director of *l'Unità* (Unity), the newspaper founded by Antonio Gramsci in 1924.

proposes, his TV and his [women] leaders, the women politicians elected for their mistress skills, TV starlets turned into ministers. [...] Italy has been reduced to a brothel. (Gregorio 2011)

Contextually, such stigmatisation served the self-construction of the respectable, Italian feminine subject, i.e. the 'mothers, grandmothers, daughters, nieces' who 'are not queuing for bunga bunga' (*ibid.*),²⁷ which the author of the post sought to rally over and above political and class differences.²⁸ In fact, this post was written in January 2011, at the beginning of 'Rubygate', a criminal investigation of the premier for abuse of office and the alleged buying of sexual services from Karima El Mahroug, a Moroccan minor who was later called Ruby Rubacuori (Ruby the Heart Stealer) by journalists.²⁹ Its appeal was effective, and indeed a few days later, a politically assorted group of women professionals and politicians launched a mass demonstration in the name of 'the dignity of women and the [national] institutions' (SNOQ 2011b). The demonstration's appeal reiterated the binary juxtaposing wives and mothers, duly working outside and inside the home, and the greedy, vain women bartering their 'beauty and intelligence' to pursue 'glamorous goals and easy money' (SNOQ 2011a). It also further warned of the social pollution induced by such behaviours, which stained the 'image in which the civil, ethical, and religious consciousness of the nation ought to be mirrored' (*ibid.*). In such, the demonstration employed terms used by the social purity movements of various European countries in the second part of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth, which demanded, sometimes successfully, the abolition of laws regulating prostitution (see for example: Walkowitz 1980; Dyhouse 2013; Wanrooij 1990).

²⁷ The origin of this term is complex; however, it was broadly used to indicate 'a type of orgy where many naked teenage girls cavort for the pleasure of a few old men' (Guardian 2011).

²⁸ Importantly, and as I discuss in Chapter 4, the call to overcome class-based differences is also explicated in terms of Italy's historically racialised fracture between its northern and southern regions. The appeal reads: 'Right-wing or left-wing, poor or rich, from the north or from the south, daughters of a time that women before you have enriched with possibilities and made equal and free, where are you?' (*ibid.*)

²⁹ At the end of May 2010, 'Ruby' was arrested in Milan on charges of theft. Berlusconi called the police station himself to have her released as a diplomatic 'courtesy' – notably stating that she was the niece of the then president of Egypt, Hosni Mubarak – thereby configuring a case for abuse of office. The minor was a regular guest at the Arcore nights, and Berlusconi was indicted with having purchased sexual services from her when she was still underage. These two accusations are the core of the 'Rubygate' trial.

More than a million women participated in what organisers described as the 'biggest and most nation-widely spread women's demonstration that has ever happened in this country' (Izzo 2011). At the last moment, sex workers' associations were invited to participate (TG24 2011; XXD 2011) to dispel feminist critiques of the organisers' patriarchal bias, which was embedded in the appeal's endorsement and reproduction of the wife/whore binary. However, its underlying class-based and racialised assumptions remained largely overlooked,³⁰ except by sex worker activists and a few left-wing feminist academics. Pia Covre, the co-founder of Comitato per i diritti civili delle prostitute (Committee for prostitutes' civil rights, hereafter: Comitato),³¹ argued that public concerns over women's morality were a smokescreen for the dismantling of welfare and rights, and the criminalisation of sex workers and migrant women (2011). Alessandra Gribaldo and Giovanna Zapperi contested the 'desperate' and 'ready to do anything' representation of young women at Berlusconi's parties, suggesting instead that their presence revealed the decreasing value of higher education as a mean for social mobility in contemporary Italy (2012: 50-51). Finally, Gaia Giuliani and Cristina Lombardi-Diop (2013: 135) observed that in public debates, race was mobilised to create hierarchies of evilness and despise even within the stigmatised group of the bad women: while migrant women were portrayed as natural whores,³² white and Italian women were painted as victims of their young age, poverty, and/or unconsciousness. The voice of these harshly stigmatised women was rarely given media airtime. When it did happen, such voice either took the form of repentance or an overt challenge to prevailing chastity norms. Such challenges

³⁰ Also overlooked was the 'orientalism' (Said 1979) underlying the widespread use – even among left-wing women, intellectuals and activists – of the term 'sultan' to depict Berlusconi (see for example: Melandri 2011; Dominijanni 2011a).

³¹ Comitato is the first sex workers' organisation in Italy, which Pia Covre established in 1982 with her colleague Carla Corso, who is still the acting president. Back then, both worked as street sex workers near a US military base (Aviano), and decided to organise in reaction to the numerous abuses committed by American soldiers against women prostitutes (Corso 1991: 173).

³² The authors report that migrant women 'were described as social climbers, ready to "sell themselves" for money and success. As if to say: "it's in their blood"' (*ibid.*: 135). A further example of such racialised stigmatisation was provided by the woman state prosecutor in Rubygate, as she described Karima El Mahrough as 'a clever person, cunning, of that oriental savvy typical of her origins', who 'takes advantage of being foreign and the daughter of Muslim people' (Ilda Boccassini, quot. in Redazione Contenuti Digitali 2013).

were so blunt, however, that their airing arguably was functional to exacerbate the woman's shaming, as it happened following the airing of an interview with an Italian escort involved in Sexgate, who reclaimed the right to capitalise on her beauty, i.e. her erotic capital:

If you're a beautiful woman and you want to sell yourself, you have to be able to do it, because beauty is a value that not everyone has or is paid for. [...] If you're ugly, if you're disgusting, you have to stay home. (Terry De Nicolò 2011)

While the media and public debate were saturated with voyeuristic tales of Sexgate's protagonists, and debates over the morality of the glamorous women involved, the country was on the edge of bankruptcy (Alessi & McBride 2015). At the end of 2011, the premier was top-down replaced with a renowned economist.³³ This epilogue constitutes the end of the historical period I refer to as Sexgate (2009-2011), which was followed by an era of sexual and economic austerity. The new, technocratic government issued long, beleaguered and painful socioeconomic reforms,³⁴ while the media turned into a watch-dog of state inefficiencies and corruption.³⁵ During this time of economic hardship and stagnation (Scherer & Mackenzie 2014), anger and shame were meticulously re-directed by the state, which 'can't bear to admit [its] abjection' (Berlant 2010a: 3), onto unfaithful citizens: corrupt civil servants, tax evaders, and sex workers, who were blamed for their (legal) income tax exemption.³⁶ In a country marked by increasing xenophobia (Popham 2013), such virulent public shaming of sex

³³ At the beginning of November 2011, the President of the Italian Republic nominated Mario Monti, an economist and former European commissioner, to be a lifetime senator. Monti's appointment paved the constitutional path to his succeeding the premiership of Berlusconi. A few days later, Berlusconi resigned and Monti became the prime minister of a technocratic government, wherein economic ministries were assigned to economists and private sector experts, including bankers (Collins 2012).

³⁴ For example, the reform of public retirement schemes (Repubblica 2011).

³⁵ This watch-dog gaze targeted fraudulent expenditures or benefits (e.g. taxis, dinners, welfare provision) at the administrative and political, central and local levels. It was reported almost daily and boosted by two widely-read newspapers: *Il corriere della sera* (The Evening Courier) and *Il fatto quotidiano* (The daily fact), which respectively reflected the positions of the entrepreneurial and liberal elites, on the one hand, and the populist ethos powering the new-born *Movimento Cinque Stelle* (Five Stars Movement) on the other.

³⁶ As I discuss in Chapter 4, the Italian prostitution law prohibits any third party's financial benefit from the prostitution of women, including the state. Nevertheless, from the end of 2011, different administrative institutions (e.g. police, income tax authority) began pursuing pathways to bypass the law in order to collect taxes from sex workers (see for example: G.R. 2012; Gigolò 2015b; Cilluffo 2015).

workers was likely further exacerbated by the high number of migrant women active in the most visible group of sex workers, i.e. street-based sex workers.³⁷

However, to be plausible and enforceable, economic austerity reforms should emanate from a respectable, moral authority. Therefore, part of the state's moral, neoliberal makeover involved painting itself as a protector of women. Suddenly, public spaces became saturated by an across-the-board preoccupation with 'femicide'³⁸ via questionable awareness campaigns from unlikely stakeholders,³⁹ and a new, paternalistic and authoritarian law was issued to protect women.⁴⁰ At the same time, such concerns went hand in hand with a persistent, widespread attitude of blaming women victims of sexual abuses for provoking their own doom. Born of the whore stigma, the legitimacy of this sexist prejudice was, for example, recently challenged in many Western countries in the form of Slutwalks (Dyhouse 2013: 240). Quite significantly, however, not only were no such marches held in Italy, but Italian women took to the streets to proclaim their respectability only a few weeks before the first Slutwalk took place in Canada.

During this same period, when the spicy details of Sexgate were being widely aired, it is notable that similar sex 'scandals' involving top male politicians were being strangely overlooked. In particular, 'Marrazzogate', as journalist termed it,

³⁷ In Chapter 4, I discuss the racialisation of the whore stigma, at the intersection of the ideology of respectability and Italian nationalism.

³⁸ 'Femicide' is 'a neologism standing for discrimination and violence against women for the fact of being a woman' (femminicidio.blogspot 2015). In 2013, two thirds of the women killed in Italy died at the hands of their husband, partner or ex (Repubblica 2014). The fast spreading moral panic is well represented by an observation I registered at the beginning of my fieldwork in late summer 2012. While in the changing room of a working-class gym I attended, I overheard a mother quoting her eleven year-old daughter: 'Stefano can be my boyfriend, or even Luca, but he should be someone I know, because nowadays there are many femicides'.

³⁹ Many of these campaigns emphasised the need for men to return to their role of protecting women (Eretica 2013). Others were launched by lingerie and fashion brands (Mondi 2013), whose sudden and short-lived attention to the theme possibly indicates that the trendiness and potential for ethical branding most attracted them.

⁴⁰ In the second half of 2013, the government issued a new law heightening the state's capacity to act against offenders if found red-handed (Cottone 2013), regardless of the offended person's will to denounce him/her. Furthermore, the law also impedes a woman claimant's ability to revoke a lawsuit once presented (Eretica 2013).

involved Piero Marrazzo, the then regional governor of Lazio,⁴¹ who was blackmailed for a video reportedly showing him having sex with a M2F migrant sex worker. While women involved in Sexgate still figure as voyeuristic subjects of media attention (Giunti 2013), media-wise Marrazzogate was immediately buried, and the video never went public. The governor resigned on the same day the news hit the media, and sought refuge in a convent (Corriere della Sera 2009).

Far from an accident, the governor's choice to seek refuge in a convent indicates the persisting influence of the Roman Catholic Church on the legal and moral discipline of sexuality in contemporary Italy, i.e. the cradle of the Catholic Church, whose capital it hosts. In recent years, Italy has been swept by a wave of panic over the diffusion of the so-called 'ideology of gender',⁴² a phrase subsuming any perceived threat to heteronormativity. Significantly, Italy is now the only Western country where same-sex unions continue to be denied any form of legal recognition (Lipka 2015; CNN 2015). Attempts by some mayors to push reform from below through municipal registration of unions enacted outside the national borders were, until very recently, cancelled by prefects in the name of 'public order' (RQuotidiano 2014); a justification which is similarly used to arrest M2F sex workers, the decriminalisation of prostitution notwithstanding.⁴³ Meanwhile, social movements such as the Sentinelle in Piedi (Standing Sentinels) (Schiavazzi 2014), which protests against the 'gender ideology', are blooming and some parties are taking advantage for populist propaganda purposes (see Fig. 1).

⁴¹ Piero Marrazzo was the governor of Lazio, which is the region where the capital Rome is located. He was elected from the rank and file of the Democratic Party, which headed Berlusconi's opposition camp.

⁴² For example, parents organised nation-wide networks and 'ten commandments' handbooks to defend their children's 'educational freedom' (Forum delle associazioni familiari dell'Umbria 2014; see also: Zanon 2015; Bianchi 2015; Corriere della Sera 2015) i.e. to prevent their exposure to topics addressing gender identity, sexual education, and other themes however indirectly affecting a heteronormative view of gender and sexuality. Pope Francis recently defined the ideology of gender as 'a mistake of the human mind' (Santo Padre Francesco 2015).

⁴³ Personal communication with Enrica, a woman lawyer specialised in the defence of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning and intersex (LGBTQI) people's rights; recorded in field notes (15 January 2015).



Fig. 1. Capriolo Municipality – Local news.
‘The local council opposes the ideology of gender’ (Redazione Online 2015).

The strong influence of the Catholic Church in the disciplining of sexuality in Italy is further attested by the increasing difficulties that women face in accessing abortion,⁴⁴ which was legalised in 1978 (Repubblica Italiana 1978) but the Church still considers a crime.⁴⁵

Having delineated the conceptual framework, the research questions, and the specific research context, I now move on to discussing my methodology, followed by the description of the different sets of fieldwork undertaken, and rationale for their inclusion.

Methodology

This dissertation is based on fieldwork I conducted in Italy (2012-2013)⁴⁶ among Italian and migrant women and M2F transgender who work in different niches of the leisure, erotic and sex markets, and whose jobs mainly revolve

⁴⁴ The percentage of conscientious objectors among health personnel is over 50% in all regions but a tiny one, Valle d’Aosta, and above 80% in a few highly populated areas in Italy’s southern regions except one, Trentino Alto Adige (Internazionale 2014). These two exceptions respectively correspond to the region whose Waldensian population was harshly repressed by the Catholic Inquisition and the region that hosted the Council of Trent, which launched the Counter-Reformation of the Catholic Church (see Chapter 4).

⁴⁵ On the occasion of the Jubilee, the Pope authorised priests to forgive abortion, its sinful status notwithstanding. As explained by the Vatican press chief, however, ‘priests preparing confession ought to make [women] understand the gravity of this crime and frame it within a pathway to conversion’ (priest Federico Lombardi, quot. in *Il Messaggero* 2015).

⁴⁶ I also had some interviews and registered field notes during the writing process, but the core of my fieldwork ended in October 2013.

around their display and use of their heterosexual desirability (i.e. their erotic capital): pole dance entrepreneurs and teachers, image girls, lap dancers, street-based and indoor sex workers.⁴⁷ I carried out participant observation in several spaces of sexualised leisure and work, whose boundaries were blurred along a continuum that, as I discuss throughout this dissertation, also reflected the women's racial and class identities: pole dance schools, discos, night clubs, indoor and street sex work.

I conducted most of my participant observation moving across the geographical region that broadly corresponds to the valley of the Po River (hereafter 'Po Valley'), as marked on the map below (Fig. 2).



I collected data through a mix of qualitative methods, notably participant observation and open-ended interviews. I recorded approximately two hundred pages of field observations on: pole dance and Burlesque schools, showcases,

⁴⁷ As I discuss later in this Introduction and in Chapter 4, my fieldwork on street sex work also included M2F transgender sex workers, and I interviewed the president of an association upholding trans rights. There were no transgender people working as pole dance entrepreneurs and teachers, nor in the night clubs where I gained access.

contests;⁴⁸ night entertainment venues (i.e. discos and night clubs); street-based sex work; local and national initiatives organised by feminist and LGBTQI groups, mainly on sexual and reproductive rights and violence against women; and public initiatives of sex workers' organisations. Throughout the research process, I also read extensively on sex work-related news and initiatives from numerous national and international sources.⁴⁹ I collected, recorded and transcribed thirty-four in-depth interviews, each of which lasted between one and a half to three hours. I gathered an additional nine interviews with lap dancers, whose length and depth were affected by access constraints (see Ethics). Annex I contains the full list of anonymised interviews (see Ethics). In quoting their words, I signalled laughter as '(h)' and emphasis by underlining the terms. Any square-bracketed text '[text]' contains my description of any other relevant information (e.g. body movements, changes in voice tone, etc.).

Interviews were open-ended and reciprocal (Chapkis 1997: 7); I guided them based on a grid of topics I exchanged with my interviewees beforehand (see Ethics and Annex II), but I also responded to questions and comments that interviewees directed at me. Especially with indoor sex workers, I consciously shared my experiences to tame the othering processes entailed in the researcher/researched relation (Scheyvens and Storey 2003). Establishing such intimacy enabled shared reflection on the topics I was investigating, and helped me become more aware of the processes affecting my own subjectification. 'Writing shame is a visceral reminder to be true to interest, to be honest about why or how certain things are of interest' (Probyn 2010: 73). Hence, I described as comprehensively as possible the context where sometimes very intimate, reciprocal disclosures could happen, making my positionality visible and avoiding any objectifying, voyeuristic, or exotic gaze.

In interpreting women's narratives, I refrained from assumptions on the 'authenticity' or 'truth' of these accounts (Armstrong 2008), focusing instead on

⁴⁸ I also registered field observation on a few Burlesque shows and one strip bar in London for comparative purposes.

⁴⁹ Sources include, but are not limited to, the following blogs and websites: Al di là del buco (Eretica 2015); Comitato per i diritti civili delle prostitute (2015); Se non ora quando (SNOQ 2015); The F-word (2015).

the multiple purposes such narratives served and the audiences they addressed, myself included, while responding to my queries (Doucet and Mauthner 2008). Therefore, I analysed women's narratives asking:

[W]hy a story is told in this way, how the location of the speaker shapes the tale, how the position of the audience affects what is heard, and [...] what is at stake politically, personally, and strategically in invoking this particular version at this moment in this context. (Chapkis 1997: 212)

Hence, I analysed women's narratives as the story of a subject in its making; a subject that speaks simultaneously to multiple discourses and audiences. I considered them processes of subjectification (Fassin 2007: 26) that occurred in a space – both the interview and case study context – saturated with concerns and assumptions about the morality and worth of women who, however differently, enjoyed and/or capitalised on their heterosexual appeal.

Although I use a feminist critique of psychoanalysis to expose and discuss the processes of women's heteronormative subjectification (Benjamin 1990; Butler 1990; Grosz 1990), I do not use psychoanalysis to analyse women's narratives or silences. Nonetheless, in pursuit of a 'thick description' (Geertz 1973) of the processes affecting women's subjectification, I also interpret women's narratives for their significance to the reproduction or challenge of the gender binary. For example, I use Susan Bordo's analysis of anorexia nervosa, which she posited as a manifestation of women's attempt to transcend femininity and achieve subjectivity through mastering their body (1990).

Analysing (women's) subjectivities, in fact, demands attuning oneself to 'the complex processes through which subjects construct a liveable sense of self in the face of multiplicity, ambivalence, contradiction and inequalities and oppressions' (Blackman 2008: 80). In fact, no subject ever fully coincides with a self-contained individual, or is ever internally consistent with him/herself. Rather, subjects are multiple, fluid, contingent and emergent, as they are always relationally constituted (Benjamin 1990: 49-50). Part of such relational construction is pursued through othering processes, which entail drawing distinctions 'between the normal and that which is taken to be Other to the

norm' (Blackman 2008: 80). The role of the Other describes the relation of woman to man (Beauvoir 1993) in heteronormativity, as she is bound to embody the projection of his either idealised or despised, complementary gendered being. As discussed in my conceptual framework, such othering processes underlie women's ambivalent subjectification through abjection, and are inflected by class, race, and sexuality, among other positionings.

The relevance of one positioning over another, however, is fluid, and affected by the different social locations that women occupy and the power differentials these engender. As I show throughout this dissertation, women take up multiple and sometimes contradictory subject positions in anticipation of, and in an attempt to tame, their known gendered stigmas. For example, oscillating from the chaste woman to the ambitious entrepreneur of her erotic capital, from the powerful queen to the woman sacrificing romance for maternal love. Such wealth and fluidity of positionings confirms the irreducibility of subjects to individuals, and demands acknowledgement that individuals are internally fragmented in a plurality of, at times contradictory, subject positions (Moore 2007: 17). It also expands the notion of agency beyond normative assumptions positing its inherently confrontational or liberating purpose (Mahmood 2001).

Finally, feminist epistemologies demand acknowledgement of, and that responsibility is taken for, the subjectivity of the knower (Harding 1992: 69), who is thoroughly implicated in the production, selection, and interpretation of the data collected (Skeggs 1997: 28; Chapkis 1997: 7). Hence, I confronted the assumptions and biases entailed in my own positionality⁵⁰ by focusing on women's words, tales and/or occurrences which left me uncomfortable or puzzled due to the challenge they posed to a coherent, or subjectively preferred, presentation of the topic under discussion (Chapkis 1997: 7). Data interpretation, awareness, and moulding of my own subjectivity ran dialogically and incessantly throughout the research process, encapsulating my commitment to what Sandra Harding defined as 'strong objectivity':

⁵⁰ I discuss my positionality later in this Introduction, in a dedicated section.

the subject of knowledge [must] be placed on the same critical, causal plane as the objects of knowledge. Thus, strong objectivity requires what we can think of as 'strong reflexivity'. (Harding 1992: 69)

In the next section I describe the different sets of fieldwork I conducted with each category of women workers, along with the rationale for their inclusion.

An ethnography of erotic and sexual services

Pole dance entrepreneurs and teachers

As discussed earlier in this Introduction, I identified pole dancing as a key prism through which to read the tensions entailed in the processes of women's subjectification in contemporary Italy. First of all, I enrolled in a beginners' course at the Bologna Pole Dance School to gain ethnographic competence on the workout involved and its athletic, erotic and artistic connotations. Over the next four months I attended weekly classes; I had to stop after that, as the physicality it demanded felt too hazardous for me. Upon enrolment I disclosed my researcher identity to the school's staff, but I did not interview any of them, nor did I record observation during or in the aftermath of classes.

I subsequently interviewed fourteen pole dance entrepreneurs and/or teachers. Most of them worked in pole dance schools⁵¹ located in the Po Valley and were white Italian women in their late twenties-early thirties. I explored the boundaries of this activity's marketability through interviewing some atypical teachers and students, notably Nicola, a working-class male student-teacher; Beatrice, a woman teacher of martial arts; and Diana's mother, Filomena (see Ethics). For comparative purposes, I also interviewed teachers and performers of Burlesque (four), aerialism (one) and Oriental dance (one). I could not quote most of these interviews in this dissertation, however, as explaining each of these activities' particularities would have taken me beyond the scope of this dissertation.

⁵¹ During my fieldwork, many schools started integrating other courses (Burlesque, aerial silk, trapeze, and circle); however, since pole dance remains their main attraction, throughout this dissertation I refer to these spaces as 'pole dance schools'.

I attended and registered field notes on schools' open days, celebrations, inaugurations, shows, and local contests in different Italian cities. I observed video recordings of Italian and international teachers and performers in different settings (e.g. contests, showcases, classes) and researched other visual material on the internet (e.g. cartoons, advertisements, amateurish videos).

Lap dancers and acrobatic strippers in night clubs

The rationale for the inclusion of women lap dancers working in male-patronised 'night clubs'⁵² stems from the understanding, early in my fieldwork, that they embodied pole dancers' archetypal abject, a metonym for the ambivalently despised and desired figure of the whore. As a woman, however, my access to night clubs was hampered by these venues' gendered entry policies, which do not envisage women as customers in their own right.⁵³ Furthermore, as a chubby woman in her mid-thirties, my aesthetics excluded me from undertaking participant observation as a night club employee, which is common for scholars researching erotic work.⁵⁴ Hence, I patiently identified special 'women welcome' events (e.g. season inauguration) organised by mainstream night clubs and attended with women friends. Similar to other scholars, however, I immediately realised that contacting women in their workspace was impracticable without obtaining the gatekeeper's permission (Bott 2006: 25-26; Dahinden 2010: 331).

I interviewed nine lap dancers, most of whom were migrant women in their twenties from Eastern European countries. These interviews were spatially bound to the lap dancers' workspace and shifts (Bott 2006: 26), and were hence shorter than other interviews, lasting twenty-thirty minutes on average. In fact,

⁵² In Italy, the term 'night club' is popularly used to indicate a range of night entertainment venues offering live erotic shows, which include sexy discos, sexy bars, strip bars, lap dancing clubs, gentlemen's clubs, etc. I also use the term this way throughout the dissertation.

⁵³ Gianna, a night club human resources manager, clearly explained this policy to me. In the extract below, she describes what I term the 'male guardianship rule', i.e. when a woman accompanies a man who is considered responsible for her behaviour (e.g. avoiding scenes, etc.): 'In the beginning, we used to have [women] exhibitionists, and you cannot let that happen because you already have yours [lap dancers] to keep an eye on. [...] So it was decided that women have to stay out and enter only and exclusively with their partners, with their men.'

⁵⁴ Brooks (2010), Colosi (2012), Law (2012), and Egan (2006) all worked as erotic/exotic dancers, while Price-Glynn (2010) worked as a cocktail waitress.

in the time they gave me workers were losing revenue on alcohol consumption, essentially paying to be interviewed. In addition, I conducted two in-depth interviews with gatekeepers, both Italian women in their forties, and two in-depth interviews with pole dance entrepreneurs and/or teachers who had previously worked as acrobatic strippers⁵⁵ in Italian night clubs and/or elsewhere.

Image girls in discos

I included image girls in my fieldwork due to their heightened stigmatisation during and in the aftermath of Sexgate, as well as the fact that pole dancers occasionally indicated image girls as part of their abjectified other. Broadly, an image girl is a type of sexualised entertainer who, in Italy, is employed in a variety of mixed commercial and/or entertainment settings (e.g. discos, private parties and events, trade fairs, etc.) to mirror back at men (Cline and Spender 1987) their need and/or desire to feel desired by a woman, powerful, worthy of attention and/or affection, etc. For the purpose of this dissertation, I focus on image girls who work in discos, as their loosely defined job⁵⁶ recalls that of lap dancers and broadly attests to the blurring borders between the leisure, erotic and sex markets,⁵⁷ which constitutes the background of this dissertation.

I interviewed four image girls working in heterosexual discos. Except for Maria Pia, an Italian woman in her early fifties, all were women in their early twenties. All were Italian but Kate, who is Ukrainian; however, Maha's parents are Moroccan and, as I show in Chapter 4, she does not self-describe as Italian. The heightened stigmatisation surrounding image girls in the aftermath of Sexgate made them particularly flighty subjects; indeed, several contacts taken in discos or snow-balled by other interviewees led nowhere.

⁵⁵ As the name suggests, acrobatic strippers are performers who integrate acrobatic tricks into their erotic shows. Off stage, however, they perform the same functions as lap dancers.

⁵⁶ In Chapter 4 I describe the job of image girls and compare it, when necessary, to that of lap dancers.

⁵⁷ For example, image girls are not required to titillate customers through displaying nudity or physical touch, although they can if they wish or accept to. 'Our staff is over protective,' Kate said in praise of her employers, 'they always ask us if there's something wrong, if a customer touches you, because frequently drunken men...or you receive proposals, etc. etc. [then] it's up to you [to accept or not]'.

Furthermore, I interviewed an Italian woman in her late twenties who works as a go-go dancer in LGBTQI clubs. Different from image girls, go-go dancers are physically separated from their audience, as they entertain, like other professional dancers, by dancing alone. Brunella's interview, hence, helped me to understand the key differences characterising image girls' workspace and function, including the management of customers' sexualised expectations.

Street-based and indoor sex workers

The decision to include a set of fieldwork on sex work stemmed from my need to relate the feminist sex wars' debate on the nature, meaning and regulation of sex work to the experiences narrated by sex workers themselves. At first I aimed to observe street sex work only, which is simultaneously the most easily accessible sex market niche to an outsider (see Ethics) and the more harshly stigmatised one.⁵⁸ Thanks to contacts developed during fieldwork, however, I also had the opportunity to meet and interview some indoor sex workers. Hence, I could reflect comparatively both on their different working conditions and the intersections of gender, class, race and sexuality underlying the segmentation of the erotic and sex markets in Italy.⁵⁹

Similar to other scholars researching street sex work (see for example: Agustín 2007; Bernstein 2007), my fieldwork consisted of a year-long collaboration with two Bologna-based, secular, non-governmental organisations providing outreach services to women and M2F transgender sex workers, notably sexual and reproductive health information and condom distribution. Upon conclusion

⁵⁸ I discuss the racialisation of the whore stigma and the constraints for migrant women in Italy arising at the intersection of migration and prostitution laws in Chapter 4.

⁵⁹ At the outset of my fieldwork, in September 2012, I also had the chance to visit an informal settlement of mainly undocumented black African male migrants working in highly exploitative conditions in southern Italy's agricultural fields. In particular, I visited the Gran Ghetto (Big Ghetto) of Rignano (Foggia), an informal camp located in the middle of a tree-less, flat piece of land. Male workers paid landlords lodging fees to stay in overcrowded cartons and plastic tents, had to pay ad hoc water and electricity provision, and worked for paltry pay (Baffoni 2014). According to the Italian volunteers and activists who provided me access to the camp, women there lodged hailed mainly from Nigeria and sold male workers either cooked meals or sexual services; Italian men also purposefully came to the camp to consume the latter. I was unable to interview anyone in those circumstances, however this observation compounded my emerging understanding of the prevailing gender-based segmentation of jobs performed by migrant men and women in Italy.

of a technical training provided to volunteers, two or three evenings a month I participated in 'night patrols' organised by Via Libera (Free Way),⁶⁰ which frequently took place in a familiar, peripheral area contiguous to the neighbourhood I was born in. Patrols were always undertaken in pairs. When I was not in the driver's seat, I registered field note observations in a notebook; otherwise, I so did upon my return home. Over time I developed a degree of familiarity with some street sex workers, and conversations with my colleagues and participation in group training sessions helped me to deepen my understanding of their working conditions and constraints. However, I did not interview any street sex workers; as stigmatised as they were,⁶¹ they were understandably wary of anyone who might jeopardise their already fragile positioning. Hence, I chose to refrain from pursuing any interview-oriented contact so as not to jeopardise the trust patiently built by the association who enabled my access in the first place. The second association I volunteered with, Non si tratta (No concessions), provides similar outreach services to street sex workers, although on a smaller scale, and is active in local awareness-raising activities, some of which I participated in.⁶²

As it pertains to indoor sex work, I interviewed three Italian women working autonomously: two in their homes in Italy⁶³ and the third as a freelance temporary worker across Western European countries where the sale of indoor sex is legal (Switzerland and Germany mainly). In addition, I also interviewed two leading Italian sex worker rights activists, both of whom are former street sex workers and now head-up organisations that provide services and advocacy for sex workers: Pia Covre, co-founder of Comitato, and Porpora Marcasciano, president of Movimento Identità Transessuale (Transsexual Identity Movement,

⁶⁰ Established in 2010, the 'association is non-political and non-confessional', and aims to 'provide support to victims of trafficking and sexual exploitation [...] It manages a mobile street unit, an accompaniment service to local socio-health services, and realises awareness-raising activities' (Via Libera Onlus 2015).

⁶¹ I discuss migrant sex workers' positionings in Chapter 4 and 5.

⁶² The association was established in 2010 with the objective of 'contrasting trafficking and exploitation within the realm of street-based prostitution'; it operates according to a principle of harm reduction that encompasses the distribution of condoms and lubricants, and facilitates street sex workers' access to health services (Non si Tratta 2015).

⁶³ As I will discuss in Chapter 4, sex workers in Italy can work autonomously and legally in their own flat, but any other form of indoor sex work is illegal (e.g. brothels, in rented flats, etc.).

MIT). Their interviews were key to understanding the diachronic transformations of the Italian sex market, especially those occurring since the arrival of migrant M2F and women from the 1980s onward.⁶⁴

Scope limitations

Different from Chapkis (1997), I did not engage in any first-hand experience in the sale or purchase of sex acts. Part of my reasoning is that, especially for women ethnographers, there is persisting resistance to the acknowledgement of any such activity as legitimate fieldwork methodology (Bernstein 2007: 200-201). Another reason is that my dissertation does not seek to establish any ontological truth about what is exchanged for money on the erotic and sex markets.⁶⁵ However, I meditated reflexively on the meaning of authenticity, commodification and intimacy through my consumption of healing treatments provided by women or men professionals, who manipulated naked body parts of mine (reflexologists, osteopaths) or provided me with psychotherapeutic counselling.

I integrated transnationality through migrant women's narratives, which included their reasons for leaving their home countries and descriptions of the emotional and economic attachments connecting them to their distant intimates, for whose livelihoods they were often the main providers.⁶⁶ However, I did not undertake research in their home countries, exploring social expectations around their engagement in erotic/sex work in Italy or the tension between choice and coercion underlying their current job. Such investigations are key to both understanding sex workers' subjectivities and agency, albeit amidst dire structural constraints (see for example: Agustín 2007; Andrijasevic 2010), and contributing to improving their health and safety as workers and human beings. Yet, undertaking this line of research would have led me too far from the original purpose of this dissertation, which is exploring women's subjectification processes in contemporary Italy. Moreover, early in my

⁶⁴ I discuss such transformations in Chapters 4 and 5.

⁶⁵ I discuss affects, embodiment, work and boundary-making in Chapter 5.

⁶⁶ I discuss migrant women's transnational emotional and economic bonds in Chapter 5.

fieldwork I realised that women's stigma-management strategies (Goffman 1963) saturated the researcher/researched relationship, thereby making the exploration of their motives an elusive endeavour. Having said so, however, my position is that sex work ought not to be conflated with 'trafficking' (see for example: TAMPEP International Foundation 2015; Andrijasevic 2010; Garofalo Geymonat 2010; Agustín 2007) and workers' experiences and conditions are multiple, 'ranging from highly coercive and exploitative to informed consent and conscious intentionality' (Weitzer & Ditmore 2010: 231).

Male customers frequently emerged in women workers' narratives, often as part of their stigma-management strategies.⁶⁷ In addition, I saw street sex workers assessing customers with a glance to decide whether to negotiate a service, listened to their reasons for refusing some,⁶⁸ and read customers' online reviews of the escort services they had consumed. However, although I am aware that academic resources in this field are scarce (see for example: Monto 2010; and for Italy: Serughetti 2013; Corso & Landi 1998; Cutrufelli 1996), I did not interview any customers. Part of this limitation in scope is derived from the purpose of this dissertation and another from the difficulties in accessing them, which are further exacerbated by my own positionality as a woman researcher. Upon concluding the writing of this dissertation, I acknowledge that, had I investigated male customers' subjectivities before my own, reflexively (see Positionality), such enquiry would have been biased with the heteronormative assumptions I was unaware I held. Hence, were I to undertake such research in the future, I would include not only men purchasing erotic and/or sexual services from women, M2F transgender and other men, but also women's emerging consumption patterns (see for example: Gigolò 2015b, for male escort services; and Goldhill 2015, on a UK-based lesbian escort agency). Indeed, as I will argue throughout this dissertation, the exclusion of male and LGBTQI workers from public debates on the regulation of prostitution/sex work reflects

⁶⁷ In this regard, in Chapter 5 I discuss how erotic and sexual workers stressed their jobs' healing function for men suffering from loneliness and/or the performative requirements of hegemonic masculinity.

⁶⁸ For example, I frequently saw more established street sex workers rejecting customers they did not know on the grounds of personal safety.

underlying heteronormative assumptions. Pursuing future research in this vein could contribute to dispelling these and highlighting the multiplicity of meanings that individuals invest in the sale and/or consumption of commodified intimacy.

Ethics

I conducted my research in compliance with the ESRC Research Ethics Framework (in: Silverman 2010: 155-156), ensuring my interviewees' voluntary participation, informed consent, right to withdraw, confidentiality, and anonymity, as well as committing myself to do no harm. I always contacted potential interviewees from my SOAS email account, presenting my research objectives and asking about their willingness and availability to be interviewed. Upon receipt of an affirmative response, I sent them the grid of the broad topics (Annex II) I wished to address during the interview, asking to confirm in writing whether they were comfortable with them, and to signal if they preferred to skip any. I asked permission to audio-record the interview, and subsequently sent each of them its transcript for their confirmation, which typically happened promptly.⁶⁹ All my interviewees were aged twenty and above, except for Diana, who is the only minor I included in my fieldwork. In fact, it was her mother, Filomena, who suggested that I interview Diana following a brief exchange we had at a local pole dance contest. However, I remained in direct and exclusive contact with Filomena, who consented to the interview topics and confirmed the transcript of what, as already highlighted at the beginning of this chapter, became her interview.

As it pertains to lap dancers, my reliance on gatekeepers – due to the access constraints discussed earlier in this Chapter – meant that I could only interview women s/he had chosen, and who expressed their consent on the basis of the interview grid I shared with him/her. As I was not provided any way to contact workers directly, I could not send them the interview transcripts for confirmation, but I have meticulously anonymised them (see *infra*). Finally,

⁶⁹ There was only one instance where the person responded that '[s/he] felt ashamed reading things [s/he] told [me]', and we agreed to cut some parts that s/he no longer felt comfortable sharing. After the edits were made, s/he confirmed the text.

during participant observation in public entertainment venues (e.g. discos, night clubs, etc.), I occasionally engaged in brief exchanges with workers and/or patrons; in such cases, I always immediately disclosed my researcher identity and purpose.

Except for Porpora Marcasciano and Pia Covre, who are renowned sex worker rights activists and consented that their real names be used, I ensured full anonymity for all of my interviewees: I changed names, blurred ages, erased or changed localities, and cut any ties between them, if such existed. Regrettably, the narrowness of the pole dance market at the beginning of my fieldwork resulted in the sacrifice of much ethnographic texture in order to maintain interviewees' anonymity. All my audio and written materials exist only on my password-protected, desktop computer in my flat, where I live on my own.

My do no harm commitment to interviewees stems, first and foremost, from the very goal of this research, which is to contribute to unveiling and easing the tensions constraining women's subjectification, and notably their enjoyment and use of sexuality. Cognizant of the stigmatisation most of my interviewees experienced, I always approached them respectfully and tactfully, expressing my gratefulness for their willingness to contribute to my research. Over time, I was able to reciprocate some of these gifts, furthering relations, whenever possible, beyond the research purpose – whether providing emotional support and advice in intimate matters, providing early career advice (e.g. reviewing CVs, signalling vacancies) and the like. With some, I developed personal relations lasting to the present day.

Consistent with my commitment to strong objectivity (Harding 1992; see Methodology), in the next section I spell out my positionality.

Positionality

I was prompted to undertake this research in the wake of the national indignation provoked by Sexgate, which exploded while I was in Lebanon working as a gender and development expert on projects funded by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. I occupied that position when Velinagate erupted,

and the media insinuated that the then Minister of Equal Opportunities, Mara Carfagna, a former model and showgirl, obtained her position through a 'sex-for-seat' exchange with Prime Minister Berlusconi (V. 2009). My unease with the postcolonial power relations embedded in development work was exacerbated by the shame I felt at championing women's empowerment in the name of such a corrupt *res publica*. However, it never occurred to me that women capitalising on their erotic capital were anyone's victim, although I considered its use in work competitions to be unfair and its value as an indicator of men's intoxication with their performance of 'hegemonic masculinity' (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005). 'And what if young women grow up believing that beauty is their best asset, and lose interest in pursuing higher education?!' I once exclaimed to Giovanna, a feminist anthropologist and long-time friend. 'Would that be anything new?' she asked, puzzled at my surprise. I eventually realised it was not new, but had first seemed so to me, as I had never till then conceived of my body and/or relative heterosexual desirability as potential socioeconomic assets.

At first, I entered into fieldwork unwittingly assuming I could 'see everything from nowhere' (Haraway 1989: 51). Analysing and interpreting data reflexively, I gradually discovered the extent to which my subjectivity was implicated in my research. However ashamed, I accepted to acknowledge that part of my initial motivation in undertaking this research had stemmed from a 'will to know' (Foucault 1990) the boundaries between me and the 'other' women, just to name these more precisely. Subsequently, I sought to unpack my own cultural assumption that the market and intimacy were two 'separate spheres and hostile worlds' (Zelizer 2005: 20-21), wherein the latter shone with authenticity, unstained by money and (self)interest. I searched for purity amidst all my intimate relations, and felt pangs of loneliness before accepting that it was an ideal none could not live up to. When I learnt that, I embraced ambivalence and multiplicity as constitutive of not only my own subjectivity, but the subjectivities of all the women I met, interviewed, and with whom I sometimes established intimate, sustained connections. I also realised that that

the fight against the whore and objectification stigmas, which differently affected the women I met and interviewed, was also mine.

‘There’s a book you should read,’ Federica said as we travelled to a pole dance contest together, ‘it’s called *Luna Rossa* (Red Moon) [(Gray 2012)]. It talks about how the menstrual cycle affects women’s moods.’ I was emotionally down that morning, and Federica surprised me with a gift. ‘It made me think of your research’, she said as I opened the tiny packet she handed me. ‘What is this?!’ I mumbled, gazing at the cheap lipstick-shaped, rhinestone-decorated pen in the palm of my hand. By then, however, I already knew that Federica had struggled with her womanhood and ‘feminine’ embodiment all her life, eventually switching to care for it meticulously in the perceived impossibility of transcending it.⁷⁰ I interpreted her gesture as an invitation to accept and embrace my own womanhood, reconciling mind and body, thinking and being.⁷¹ ‘I’ve never heard of this book,’ I said, guessing from the title that it was steeped in biological essentialism, ‘I will buy it...But the title reminds me of something...’ I mumbled aloud. ‘The sailing boat?’ she asked. ‘No, no, wait a second...’ I said. ‘Prada?’ she urged, hinting at this brand’s fragrance for men and the catamaran it sponsored in sailing competitions, neither of which I was aware of. ‘No, no...ah!’ I exclaimed finally, flashing back fifteen years to the days I studied political science and was a committed anti-racist, anti-war, pro-Palestine (but not yet feminist) activist, ‘It’s the title of a combat song I learnt at university.’ The song decries the social injustice inherent in the rule of the bourgeoisie, which is so dire that the ‘moon is red, red with violence’ (Banda Bassotti 1995). Although it was popular among left-wing people of our generation, Federica had never heard the song. Yet, I also felt estranged singing it: was I not a middle class woman, after all?

I became further aware of my own class positioning during my participant observation on street sex work. ‘Hola, que tal?’⁷² Christina greeted as our van approached her during a night patrol. She had left Spain two weeks earlier in

⁷⁰ In Chapter 2, I discuss Federica’s troubled relation with her body.

⁷¹ I discuss Cartesian dualism and embodiment in Chapter 5.

⁷² ‘Hi, how are you?’

the hopes of earning fast money through street sex work in Italy, as her own country was sustaining a dire economic recession. 'So far so good', she replied when I asked how work was going. Endowed with condoms and an EU passport, which allowed her straightforward access to health services, Christina needed nothing from us. Hailing from a Spanish city around the size of Bologna, and approximately as old as I was, I could not help imagining myself in her shoes, wondering about the role of class in shaping our reciprocal positioning – myself as an aid worker and mature, paying PhD student, and she as a street sex worker.

White in a country where whiteness is still considered a natural attribute of national identity,⁷³ I never felt uncomfortably visible or that my skin colour ignited reactions from my interviewees, most of whom were themselves white. As an Italian, I had the advantage of researching in my and most of my interviewees' native language, and although the definition of cultural insiders/outside is at best approximate (Armstrong 2008: 62), I shared many cultural references with my interviewees. At the same time, a near constant comparison with the countries I have long lived and worked and/or studied in (mostly the occupied Palestinian territories, Lebanon, the UK) helped me to defamiliarise from my native research context, and especially to identify the persistently strong grip the Catholic Church has on the moral and legal discipline of sexuality in Italy.

In the next and concluding section of this introductory chapter, I outline the overall structure of the dissertation.

Dissertation outline

This dissertation is organised into 6 chapters. In **Chapter 1**, I frame the research by describing its general and specific context, and outlining the theoretical framework, research questions, and methodology. In **Chapter 2**, I move on to investigate the tensions entailed in women's subjectification through the lens of the boom in pole dancing for pleasure, analysing the significance of the type of femininity consumed and sold by pole dance entrepreneurs and teachers for the

⁷³ I discuss color and the nation in Chapter 4.

reproduction of heteronormativity. I engage with feminist scholarship debating women's subjectivities and agency along binaries juxtaposing sexual objectification and empowerment, oppression and liberation, dependence on a desiring male audience and autonomy. I focus in particular on the paradigm of women's internalised oppression, showing both this paradigm's usefulness in identifying the heteronormative constraints affecting women's subjectification and the liberal biases underpinning the gendered self/other binary upon which this paradigm rests. On this basis, I then discuss how the type of femininity that pole dance entrepreneurs and teachers consume, and sell to other women, blends chastity and sexiness, gracefulness and muscularity under the swinging Damocles sword of the whore and objectification stigmas, and fear of losing their gender identity together with heterosexual attractiveness. Caught amongst the tensions constraining women's heteronormative subjectification, I conclude the chapter by suggesting that many pole dancers claimed their chastity, thereby articulating their positioning as respectable feminine subjects, to negotiate a bit more freedom to perform roles to which they were (ambivalently) attracted.

Marginally discussed in feminist scholarship debating sexualisation and prostitution/sex work in contemporary Western countries, the polyvalent significance of 'respectability', and its constitutive gendered, sexualised, classed, racialised othering processes (see for example: Skeggs 1997; Mosse 1996; McClintock 1995), forms the backbones of **Chapters 3 and 4**. To this end, I enlarge the analytical field to include pole dancers' abjects (i.e. erotic and sex workers), thereby foregrounding the contradictions between women's respectability claims and their engagement in practices involving the display of sexuality in public and/or the sale of erotic capital.

In **Chapter 3**, I discuss women's respectability claims in relation to symbolic processes of social class dis/identification (Skeggs 1997) and 'distinction' (Bourdieu 1984), thereby pursuing a discussion on the meanings of women's sexuality at the intersection between the spheres of consumption and work. I begin with a discussion of the hierarchies of social and economic value

reproduced through the normalisation, glamorisation or stigmatisation of different brackets of the erotic and sex markets in contemporary sexualised culture. Next, I show how pole dance entrepreneurs and teachers – who generally approached this practice first as consumers – claimed their respectability, i.e. their gendered and class-based distinction from their abjects (lap dancers, as metonyms of the figure of the whore), by blending virtue and pleasure, bruised and glamorous bodies. The chapter continues by highlighting the class biases underlying the feminist sex wars debate on prostitution/sex work in a context characterised by exacerbated contradictions between late capitalism consumerist-driven growth and increasing economic precarity, which limits individuals' capacities to fulfil the promise of pleasure projected on consumption (Appadurai 1996: 82-83). In conclusion, I illustrate the class biases embedded in and reproduced by striptease culture, highlighting the contradictory experiences voiced by women, especially young women, as they shift from practising sexy dances for pleasure (i.e. as consumers) to practising them for a living (i.e. as workers) in a context of increasing economic precarity.

In **Chapter 4**, I analyse the racialised and sexualised othering processes underlying women's articulation of their positioning as respectable feminine subjects. Prompted by the acknowledgement that pole dancers conflated a woman's respectability (or lack thereof) with her nationality, in this chapter I explore the interplay between respectability – as a middle class ideology of distinction – and Italian nationalism, colonialism, imperialism, and Catholicism. Engaging with postcolonial scholarship discussing sexuality and race as devices of rule, I undertake a genealogy (Foucault 1984: 6) of state-regulated prostitution (i.e. regulationism), investigating the state's role in the production of Italy as a respectable, i.e. heterosexual and white, nation. Subsequently, I discuss the legacy of Italian imperialism on the racialised segmentation of pleasure, erotic and sex market niches, where whiteness prevails. I follow this with an interrogation of the meaning of Italian nationalism's affective relation towards regulationism, with reference to the influence of the Catholic Church on the country's moral and legal disciplining of sexuality. In foregrounding the functionality of the prostitution of women for heteronormativity, I eventually

unpack the meanings underlying Italy's standalone position for a return to regulationism and against the recognition of same-sex unions.

Chapters 3 and 4, hence, address the intersections of gender, sexuality, class and race underlying Italian women's chastity and respectability claims, and their concomitant othering of erotic and sex workers and migrant women. In **Chapter 5**, I explore the tensions characterising women's heteronormative subjectification as articulated by women abject-ified by respectability, i.e. whose job entails taking up the position of the simultaneously despised and desired 'whore'. I begin by showing how, in describing their job, Italian and migrant women erotic/sex workers articulated multiple metaphors of separation between their bodies and themselves, their work and their intimate sphere, attempting to tame the multi-faceted, intersecting stigmas they knew to be labelled with. To discuss these findings, I engage with sociological and feminist scholarship discussing affect, work and embodiment, focusing on workers' capacity to articulate boundaries separating themselves from their labour, as well as the underlying meanings of such boundary-making. Subsequently, I discuss the neat separation of the market and intimacy (Zelizer 2005: 20-1), the binary upon which stigmas on prostitution/sex work rest, and show how Italian and migrant erotic and sex workers' boundary-making strategies partially represent a tactic for resisting the stigmas they experience at and because of their work. To this end, I discuss women's engagement in these jobs within the broader sphere of personal aspirations and intimacy, encompassing their affective bonds to beloved dependents, within a context characterised by economic precarity and racialised, gendered employability patterns. In conclusion, I unpack the class and racialised biases embedded in the construction of acceptable degrees and types of work-induced pain, juxtaposing the figure of the prostitute/sex worker to that of the white Western aid worker.

In **Chapter 6**, I draw the conclusions of this dissertation. I argue that the meanings women invest in their display and use of sexuality highlight the need to overcome the dichotomies underlying feminist scholarship on sexualisation and prostitution/sex work, which juxtapose objectification and empowerment,

oppression and liberation, dependence and autonomy, victimization and choice. Contrary to the feminist goal of autonomy, which reflects and engenders a liberal understanding of the individual and his/her agency, I foreground the ambivalence of dependence and independence, desire and fear, pleasure and pain, which are intrinsic to the relational constitution of subjects and the social. Taking issue with the prioritisation of gender over other axes of inequality, which reflects second wave Western feminists' particular viewpoint, I argue that class is central to women's articulation of their subjectivities and agency, as they seek status and pleasure through consumption (i.e. glamour) and pursue dreams of social and spatial mobility amidst gendered and racialised employability patterns and mobility constraints. Consistent with this analytical shift, I highlight how women's investment of different blends of sex, care and love in their work, especially migrant women, point to the class and racialised biases underlying the normative assumption that the spheres of the market intimacy are, and ought to remain, neatly separated. Finally, I argue that current public debates on the legal disciplining of prostitution/sex work, which are heavily informed by the feminist abolitionist position, are flawed by heteronormative biases and overlook the dialectics between heteronormativity and homophobia, marriage and homosexuality, and state and non-state actors, such as the Catholic Church in Italy.

Chapter 2. Pole Dancing for pleasure:

women's heteronormative

subjectification between chastity and

sexuality

'Hi! I'm looking for a dance school...do you know where it is?'

A young, slender and tanned woman wearing a short white cotton dress smiled and approached me as I stepped out of my car, which was parked in front of a white hangar on the outskirts of Bologna. It was Saturday morning in late summer, and I was about to participate in a free taster event organised by Pole Dance Bologna; however, there was no placard or sign anywhere indicating the school's presence in the area, not even on the gate corresponding to its address. Smiling in return and assuming we were looking for the same place, I told Monica, 'I'm going to the same place, let's walk together'. Chatting, we passed the gate, entered a bare, asphalt courtyard and continued walking past an industrial car wash.

'Excuse me, are you going to...?'

Monica and I turned toward the hesitant voice of a heavily made up, chubby woman seemingly in her mid-thirties. 'Yes,' I replied confidently, again assuming I knew what she was looking for, 'we are also going there'. 'Finally!' Giulia sighed in relief, 'It took me an hour to drive! But this is the nearest school to Ferrara...' When I started preparing for my fieldwork in spring 2012, the commercialisation of pole dancing in Italy for fitness and leisure was in its nascent stages, as compared to other Western countries. For example, in the UK, pole dancing was being taught in a variety of venues, ranging from leisure centres to gyms (see, for example: Fitness First, 2015; Virgin Active Nottingham, 2015). In Italy, on the other hand, courses only ran in a few main cities in specialised schools. Bologna had the first such school in the entire Emilia Romagna region; and it was only established in 2009.

As we turned the corner, we saw a handwritten, A4 sheet of paper stuck on a white plastic door, indicating the school's entrance. However, in contrast to the anonymous and slovenly appearance, the school was abuzz all weekend, as tens of young women – mostly in their twenties and thirties – moved in and out, up and down the building sampling the courses on trial. As I drove home on Sunday

night, I realised that what I had considered Giulia's odd fancy was, rather, a sign of pole dancing's impending commercial boom in Italy.¹

The image of Monica, Giulia and I shiftily walking towards a place that no-one dared to name, reveals the ambivalence entailed in the transformation of an activity associated with women dancing for money in male-patronised strip clubs, to one of women's leisure and fitness. Hesitation signalled fear of being stigmatised, as lap dancers and strippers, with the gendered stigma of the whore, but at the same time, an unnamed desire catalysed such spatial crossing into the field of the abject feminine other.

Academic literature analysing pole dancing as a women's fitness and leisure activity in Western countries situates the phenomenon at the intersection of the wider accessibility to, and glamour surrounding, recreational and commodified sex and the ascendancy of postfeminism in media and popular culture (see for example: Lamb, Sharon et al., 2013: 166-167; Owen, 2012: 84; Whitehead & Kurz, 2009: 228; Holland & Attwood, 2009: 166-167; Attwood, 2009: xiii-xiv; Gill, 2009). However, these researches are exclusively focused on a few Western countries, where pole dancing's mainstream appeal has a longer history (notably: US, UK, Australia) and postfeminism is relatively influential as a discourse.

Differently, the mainstreaming of pole dancing in Italy was taking place in a context characterised by a neat juxtaposition between good women (i.e. chaste) and bad women (i.e. promiscuous). As an activity still largely associated with the latter, and in a post-Sexgate scenario heavily marked by sexual and economic austerity, pole dancing brought a stage of 'liminality' (Turner 1985) to the forefront, wherein the tensions associated with the processes of women's heteronormative subjectification became more visible. Exploring such tensions is this chapter's objective, thereby analysing the significance of the type of

¹ For example, two years after the beginning of my fieldwork Ferrara opened two pole dancing schools (Pole Dance Italy, 2014).

femininity consumed and marketed by pole dance entrepreneurs and teachers for the reproduction of heteronormativity.

I begin with a discussion of feminist scholarship debating women's subjectivity and agency along the binary juxtaposing sexual objectification and empowerment. I focus, in particular, on the paradigm of women's internalised oppression, showing both the paradigm's usefulness in identifying the heteronormative constraints affecting women's subjectification and the liberal biases underpinning the gendered self/other binary upon which this paradigm rests. Following on, I then discuss how domesticity and sexiness, gracility and muscularity blend in the desired and feared femininity that is both consumed and marketed by pole dance entrepreneurs and teachers in Italy. To conclude, I introduce the theme of respectability, and of the construction of the respectable feminine subject, which will constitute the backbone of subsequent Chapters 3 and 4.

Subjectification between objectification, empowerment and desire

Feminist scholars researching pole dancing unanimously report that students claim the activity as 'empowering' and 'sexually liberating' (Donaghue & Whitehead, 2011: 446; Holland, 2010: 99; Holland & Attwood, 2009: 180-181; Whitehead & Kurz, 2009: 240). However, opinions vary on what drives students' perception of empowerment, questioning the assumptions underlying the production and circulation of this feeling, as well as its durability across time and space. For some scholars, pole dancing's homosociality presents an opportunity for women to cultivate and experience a genuine form of empowerment. Women 'perform for each other rather than servicing men for money' (Holland & Attwood, 2009: 170; see also Holland, 2010: 3), while also possibly accessing 'a fantasy of a woman who is able to be sexy and take command "by doing what she wants... rather than what she thinks she has to do"' (Holland & Attwood, 2009: 180). In contrast, Owen considers pole dancers as consumers of a service produced by a 'dispersed, invisible patriarchy' (2012: 80), which is 'historically coincident with, and arguably contingent upon, the

material expansion of lap- and table-dancing clubs on the North American model' (*ibid.*: 84). Other feminist writers share Owen's dismissal of pole dancing, as they posit the activity to be an 'equation of empowerment and liberation with sexual objectification' (Walter, 2011: 6; see also: Levy, 2006). For Donaghue & Whitehead, homosociality is a smokescreen that enables a 'plausible deniability that pole dancing might "really" be about turning men on' (2011: 452).

At the core of this debate lies the definition of what it means to be a woman within a heteronormative framework, wherein she's bound to embody the other of man. In the writings of Freud and Lacan, femininity is defined as a lack of the penis and its associated power, to which the phallus itself is (albeit illusorily) conflated (Grosz, 1990: 116). Conceived by psychoanalysis as naturally castrated, woman develops a number of 'reactive strategies' to seduce the bearer of the phallus in order to ensure that 'even if she doesn't *have* the phallus, she may *become* the phallus' – i.e. his object of desire (Grosz, 1990: 132). Accordingly, she performs a 'masquerade', as

she retains her position as the object of the other's desire only through artifice, appearance, or dissimulation. Illusion, travesty, make-up, the veil, become the techniques she relies upon to both cover over and make visible her 'essential assets'. They are her means of seducing or enticing the other, of becoming a love-object for him [...] a mode of access to the phallic. (Grosz, 1990: 132)

According to Laura Mulvey, 'to-be-looked-at-ness' is what connotes women's image, role, and aesthetics in mainstream movies, and reflects men's role as the holders of the desiring (male) gaze that women are styled to please:

in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy on to the female form which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. (Mulvey 1975: 19)

However inherently relational, as it entails a viewer/subject and a viewed/object, the male gaze can also be internalised by women (Bartky, 1990: 27). The concept of women's 'internalised oppression' originates in Bartky's

comparison of the experiences of alienation lived by workers under capitalism and women under patriarchy. According to Marx, human labour is the 'free and creative productive activity that should define human functioning' and when capitalist production appropriates it, 'workers suffer fragmentation and loss of self' (*ibid.*: 32). However alienated though, workers may try to resist, but Sandra Bartky notes that women instead not only comply with the requirements of alienation, i.e. their 'sexual objectification' to please men, but also find it 'pleasurable' (*ibid.*: 36-37). The ensuing female narcissism – i.e. a woman's fascination with her aesthetics – stems from women's internalisation of their phallic role, which is performed through a specific feminine embodiment and range of bodily practices – e.g. moulding body size, posture, and display (*ibid.*: 65-68). Consistent with Foucault's analysis of 'panopticism' (1977), Bartky argues that 'the disciplinary power that inscribes femininity in the female body is everywhere and it is nowhere', both 'dispersed and invisible' (1990: 74-75).

Reading a woman's care for, and work on, her appearance and desirability as expressions of internalised sexual objectification only would, however, imply that she ought to give up the pleasure of being desired by an-other in order to truly be herself. This assumption, however, is problematic for a number of reasons.

Firstly, the notion of authenticity implies a capacity for judgement (impossibly) outside the very power that produced us in the first place. As cogently argued by Judith Butler in her analysis of the 'paradox of subjection' (1997: 4), 'subjection signifies the process of becoming subordinated by power as well as the process of becoming a subject' (*ibid.*: 2). No subject can exist outside the power that produced her/him and, at the same time, the agency of the subject 'appears to be an effect of its subordination' (*ibid.*: 12). Hence, agency is inherently ambivalent as 'the power assumed may at once retain and resist that subordination' (*ibid.*: 13). This insight is further compounded by Saba Mahmood's critique of the liberal biases underlying Western feminists' assumptions of agency, as necessarily entailing 'resistance to relations of domination' (2001: 206-207). Accordingly, women's agency cannot be

conceived within an either/or framework – e.g. power vs. resistance, objectification vs. empowerment – but as inherently ambivalent (*ibid.*: 13).

Hence, if no-one is external to the power that produces us, and if we detach agency from prescriptive ideals, judgement on anyone's autonomy, dependence, – or internalised oppression – ought to be tamed; we should instead embark on a more nuanced discussion of degrees. In this vein, Diana Meyers suggested 'to detoxify narcissism' (2002: 145), shifting the focus from the outcome pursued (e.g. beauty, desirability) to the conditions of pursuance,² and enabling the exploration of women's self-defined 'narcissistic commitments' (*ibid.*: 147).

Secondly, the paradigm of internalised oppression both presupposes and reproduces a neat, gendered binary juxtaposing men and women. Men are painted here as the bearers of the sexually objectifying gaze and women as passive, sexualised objects plundered of agency and responsibility. This view is consistent with the position of 'woman' in heteronormativity, as posited by Freudian psychoanalytic theories, that conceptualise women's passivity and objectification as naturally flowing from their lack of penis and associated phallic power.

'Intersubjective theory', conversely, envisages subjectification as always stemming from the relation between two *subjects*, wherein domination is 'a two-way process, a system involving the participation of those who submit to power as well as those who exercise it' (Benjamin 1990: 5). Criticizing Freudian theories' intrinsic biological determinism, Jessica Benjamin traced the origins of women's passivity and objectification in human beings' psychic development, starting from the 'conflict between dependence and independence in infant life' (1990: 7-8). The conflict begins as the infant seeks to establish an autonomous, independent subject position detached from, and recognised by, the mother – the human out of whom s/he was born and to whom s/he was long attached for nourishment (*ibid.*: 19-20). Separation from the mother is the condition for the

² For example, questioning whether such a pursuance condemns one to live in a permanent state of dissatisfaction (*ibid.*: 121-2), asking to what extent such is a feminine duty only, and suggesting to democratise narcissistic agency through focusing on attractiveness (vs. beauty) (*ibid.*: 145).

child to enter the social, and yet s/he longs for that feeling of wholeness, which signifies re-incorporation, dissolution, and loss of boundaries. Initially 'all infants feel themselves to be like their mothers', however 'boys discover that they cannot grow up to *become* her, they can only *have* her'; hence, boys experience 'a break in identification' (*ibid.*: 75). Both loved and feared, the male child struggles between his desire to be the object of his mother's love, thereby returning to the original plenitude with her, and his fear of being absorbed back into her (*ibid.*: 19-20). When this perennial tension between dependence and independence becomes unbearable, the psyche reacts through 'splitting' (*ibid.*: 50).³ Hence, the male child pursues differentiation and independence through domination of a subject (i.e. the mother), who is therein reduced to an object; a behavior from which the objectification of women stems (*ibid.*: 77).⁴

Crucially, such a subjectification process relies on and reproduces a liberal view of the subject as autonomous exactly *because* s/he is detached and self-sufficient; a view that many feminist scholars have criticised for its role in perpetuating women's subordination to men (see for example: Bordo, 1993: 4-5; Seidler, 1987: 82; Young, 1985). However, feminists scholars' critiques that the pleasure women articulate in feeling desirable in the eyes of men constitute an expression of women's own internalised objectification, as highlighted in the context of scholarship on pole dancing, seem to reproduce some of these same liberal biases. Here, the feminist, normative goal of autonomy (vs. dependence from a desiring male audience) seems to be an attempt at pursuing subjectivity through denying the intrinsic relationality of being, beginning with the ambivalent process of longing and fearing separation from the mother. Domination, in this case, is not pursued by objectifying the other (as in the male child's objectification of his mother), but instead by suppressing the desire for the other, the longing and struggling to be the object of his/her desire. Hence, the feminist goal of autonomy seem to rely on a reversal of the gendered

³ In Chapter 1 I discussed 'splitting', male sexuality and the good/bad women binary.

⁴ The problem of differentiation for the girl child is 'almost as the mirror image of the male's: not the denial of the other, but the denial of the self [...], not to emphasize but to underplay independence', thereby re-enacting 'their early identificatory relationship to the mother' (*ibid.*: 78-79) who lacks subjectivity and agency (*ibid.*: 78).

subject/object binary, implying that women can only achieve subjectivity by dominating (their attachments to) men.

Hence, I, conversely, emphasise the centrality of desire, the vulnerability intrinsic to losing one's place as the object of the other's desire, and the relational constitution of the subject. According to Lauren Berlant, Lacan does not explain sexual difference through biology, and notably possession/lack of the penis. Hence, Berlant points instead to the gendering of the 'anxiety' intrinsic to desirability: women wish to embody men's object of desire and men wish to 'possess' women to confirm their status as (male) subjects (2012: 57). Such anxiety requires constant 'performativity' (Butler, 1990); at the same time, however, desire for the (m)other is intrinsic to processes of subjectification and simultaneously contributes to weaving social relations. As Henrietta Moore states: 'Desire is elliptical in its nature, it works by attaching individuals as subjects to its negation or denial, and through that process constitutes both the subject and the social' (2007: 20).

In the next section, I begin to discuss how women pole dance entrepreneurs and teachers' narratives blended empowerment and dependence on a desiring male audience, the pleasures of desirability with multifaceted fears of stigmatisation.

Pole dancing between homosociality and heterosexual desirability

Academic literature mainly focuses on analysing pole dancing as a form of consumption. Set in the UK, the only work discussing pole dancing in labour terms depicts it as an expression of the "resurgent patriarchy" (McRobbie, 2009: 85) of neoliberal capitalism' (Owen, 2012: 80), wherein women are positioned at the bottom of the production process:

What emerges is a sense of an industry in steady expansion, inserting itself into existing economies, with training performed by precarious, female, freelance workers. And, far from constituting grassroots, "anti-establishment" initiatives, these operations mime the logic and business models of multinational capitalist enterprise. (*ibid.*: 88)

At the time of my fieldwork, however, Italy's prevailing business model was significantly different, typically consisting of a small enterprise run by a woman in her late twenties/early thirties, who was herself also a teacher. As their customer base expanded, women entrepreneurs employed additional women teachers and collaborated with freelance women professionals to widen the courses on offer. For employees, teaching pole dance was often part-time; a job they could pursue as either additional work or alongside university studies. While the money was insufficient to live on, they nonetheless considered the work well paid;⁵ in addition, and more important to this study, most of my interviewees considered teaching pole dance to be an extension of a pleasurable activity.

'Sincerely, I lost my mind for this discipline'⁶, said Francesca, a woman in her early thirties and a pioneering pole dance entrepreneur in Italy, 'So, I thought, what the hell. If I lost it, many others will as well, because I'm no fool, right?' Francesca now owns and runs a pole dance school where she, herself, teaches an advanced course. Intermediate and beginner courses are taught by a core group of women employees, who are sometimes assisted by ad hoc professionals. Like Francesca's, most schools I visited complemented pole dancing courses with a range of more or less regular and/or ad hoc courses in 'sexy chair', 'sexy flexy',⁷ Burlesque, circle, trapeze and aerial silk. As the owner of one of the first schools in Italy, Francesca desired and was able to establish collaborations with newly established ones. 'We are a network', she explained as we sat in the plain kitchen of the flat she had rented after breaking up with her boyfriend, who was jealous of her success.⁸

⁵ The pole dance teachers I interviewed were paid eighteen-twenty Euros per hour, which is three times the average pay of a waiter, and two times that of a shop assistant.

⁶ I discuss the ambivalences of her use of the term 'discipline' in the following section.

⁷ The brochure of Pole Dance Bologna (2012), for example, described 'sexy chair' as a blend of 'the art of a sensual dance with vigour and physical strength aided by a chair', and 'sexy flexy' as a combination of 'floor work, stretching and static positions of strength'; the use of high heel shoes with ankle strap was recommended for both courses. Most schools also organise hen parties, including mini-stagings of pole dance, Burlesque, or the 'polesque' hybrid (*Pole Dance Italy*, 2012), akin to what happens in the UK (Holland, 2010: 32).

⁸ 'He truly engaged in a competition with me', she recounted, 'work-wise he was dissatisfied, so I couldn't share anything with him, no joy, no travel, no going out [...] so eventually we split'.

Girls contact me and if I like them (not technically, that's something that can always be improved, but as people) I later establish a partnership with them. But this is no franchise: I'm just an individual firm [...] and I did not ask for any direct profit from this, e.g. 'I give you my logo, you give me the money'. I only want indirect earnings: if I organise a workshop, they bring me girls [customers], and every now and then I do a class or show in their city and they take care of organising all the details. More than anything else, I wanted to establish a women's network, and that's what has happened.

As her words portend, Francesca is a pumping heart of an expanding network of horizontally-affiliated schools, wherein women entrepreneurs and teachers provide services (almost exclusively) to women customers whom they, occasionally, share. In a country with the second worst gap in male and female employment at the EU level (European Commission, 2013), this peculiarly feminine business, run by women for women, fosters entrepreneurship, income and jobs among women. It also constitutes a space where women can dedicate time to cultivating a pleasurable relationship with their body, as suggested by the below mission statement of a pole dance school:

The project of a place that gathers female arts and gives space to all women was born from the will to do something completely detached from the ordinary. It grew from the need to identify a female oasis,⁹ where women can train, dance, play, create, photograph and have fun with their own bodies in all the ways that art allows. Within the school, we give space to sensuality and imagination, and we especially give women of all ages the chance to challenge themselves, to look at themselves, to transform themselves, and to have fun outside of classical schemes through new and alternative artistic means. (Female Arts Studio 2013)

However run by women for women, the physical (and in Italy, also financial) absence of men from pole dancing is less neat than it first seems. Several factors indicate that, underneath pole dance's homosociality, there is an implicit male referent for whom women consumers cultivate their heterosexual desirability.

To begin, the ubiquitous presence of mirrored walls in gyms, dance schools, etc. suggests a pedagogical justification, despite the fact that direct (versus reflected) observation of teachers' movements would suffice. More importantly, the mirror is a tool to monitor oneself in the act of performing, and a

⁹ The image of an 'oasis' specifically recalls the image of desert and, more broadly, the 'Orient', exuding sensuality and exoticism. I discuss racialised desire in Chapter 4.

performance necessarily entails an audience whose confirmation of one's grace, pleasantness, and value is sought. Mirrors, hence, constitute a tool through which women can style their appearance and bodily practices to embody what Laura Mulvey defined as 'to-be-looked-at-ness' (1975: 19).

Like Francesca, many pole dance entrepreneurs and teachers use the term 'disciplina' (discipline) in reference to pole dancing, thereby inviting their audience to read it as a sport rather than dance activity. They similarly extend this term to a range of other courses they sell and/or teach, albeit having irrelevant athletic or sportive content. Paradoxically, however, such switch from eroticism to athletic asceticism foregrounds a very Foucaultian notion of discipline, as that which "“makes” individuals; [...] both as objects and as instruments of its exercise' (Foucault, 1977: 170). Such Foucaultian productivity of the male gaze struck me during the end of year celebration at a pole dance school. A carefully made-up young, slender woman in a black stretch dress and red high heel shoes presented the sexy chair course to the audience as 'a discipline that enhances students' plasticity and sensuality'. When she finished, a group of women dressed in red tops, black culottes, tulle trains and red high heel shoes, walked on stage to perform an alluring dance routine around and on a cheap black plastic chair, culminating in the removal of their long black gloves.

The definition of such activities, aiming to boost women's feeling of their heterosexual desirability, as 'disciplines' highlights an ethnographic observation emerging from my fieldwork: marketing strategies in Italy emphasise austerity and modesty rather than irony and sexiness. Many scholars observed the centrality of irony and fun in UK marketing strategies for pole dance, Burlesque and other sex-related forms of consumption (e.g. sex toy parties) (see for example: Holland & Attwood, 2009: 179; Price-Glynn, 2010: 36; Holland, 2010: 32). Donaghue and Whitehead noted that pole dance is ambiguously marketed as a 'a novel way to get an upper body workout while having "a bit of a laugh"' (2011: 443). The powerful aura of sexiness embedded in the strip club imagery is denied through the association to sports, and downplayed through irony (*ibid.*: 453). A blend of irony and self-sexualisation is, for example, evident in the

use of the iconic 1994 Wonderbra campaign slogan 'Hello Boys' (Doherty 2015) - which Angela McRobbie heralds as a prototypical example of postfeminist irony (2009: 17) - as the name of a popular pole dance trick that culminates in an enticing position.¹⁰

Revealingly, however, becoming 'very strong' in order to 'be able to carry shopping bags by yourself' is, according to the Pole Dance Italy blog, the top out of nine reasons for women to begin a pole dancing course (D'Amico, 2014b). Half way through the list, domestic efficiency is reinforced by the desire to transform 'saggy arms' into 'two hard-worked arms [and] straight shoulders from which shopping bags won't slip anymore' (*ibid.*). Sensuality and self-confidence are only second to last on the list, followed by the pleasure of feeling 'like flying' (D'Amico 2014b).

As I show in the subsequent section, pole dance entrepreneurs and teachers would, in private, contradict this official discourse. Yet, its very need already conveys a remarkable difference in the ethnographic context in which women in Italy consume this activity. Ubiquitous and forceful constraints on women's performance of a sexier femininity in public, rather than an incitation thereof, adds nuance to the analysis of their subjectification, beyond binaries juxtaposing oppression and liberation, sexual objectification and empowerment, dependence from a desiring male audience and autonomy.

Marketing a space-bounded transgression

At least partially due to her entrepreneurial success, Francesca has a reputation for being a shrewd businesswoman in the national pole dance scene. This image was, however, light years away from the laid back person who opened the door to me wearing a tracksuit and no make-up in late morning. 'When did you start practicing pole dancing?' I asked Francesca, while turning on my audio recorder

¹⁰ As I learnt at my pole dancing beginners' course, the 'Hello Boys' trick involves lifting oneself up on the pole, holding it in between one's inner thighs and then lowering the back down and lifting the legs up to align oneself perpendicularly with the pole. The grip is maintained by placing one hand underneath the other. When balance is achieved, one has to open one's legs in a vertical V shape in front of an imaginary audience. At this point, the teacher pronounced the salutation consisting of the name of the trick.

and placing it on her kitchen table. 'Ok, basically I started...' she paused for a few seconds and then continued:

I'll tell you the two versions: the official one and the truth. The official version is that it was the only period in my life when I wasn't practicing any sport because I was working hard. I had just finished university etc., and one day on YouTube I found a very cool pole dance course organised in a night club...because there were no schools yet, you know? I immediately fell in love with it. [...] However, the truth is that I was in a night club with my boyfriend and we saw this girl dancing very acrobatically with the pole. I was amazed, and I have documented myself since. Obviously I don't say this version to everyone. When they ask me 'how did you discover pole dance?' I don't say 'uhm, well...I was in a night club with my boyfriend'; I always say 'I found it on YouTube'.

Francesca's fascination with pole dancing was sparked by this woman's amazing performance in a space enmeshed with eroticism and transgression, but also widely stigmatized. Her fear of being stigmatised both for her improper sexual behaviour and living off an activity associated to the whore stigma, pushes her to contrive an official version of how she began. This double bind of public modesty and private transgression of prevailing chastity norms also emerged when I asked her opinion of why women choose to practice pole dancing:

Women's curiosity about pole dancing stems from the fact that you hang onto a pole, and eventually all women want to be like that. I mean, being charming and seductive...a woman really likes to have this role, because in the normal society we cannot be like that. We...I mean, to the extreme, we would all like to be bitchier, right? But we can't dress in a certain way, we can't wear certain shoes, we can't make certain types of movements...Anyway we are...we have taboos, we are compelled...not in terms of coercion, but we are compelled to be a certain way. So, we all need a relief valve to feel like hot chicks, to feel like hotties, to feel a bit bitchy. If you think about it, it's bad, but eventually it's a bit like this, and this is what drives many people to pole dancing.

In Francesca's words, all women, herself included, are naturally exhibitionist. Hence, pole dancing provides an opportunity to cultivate a set of bodily practices promising women access to a stage, where they can satisfy their quest of feeling sexy and (heterosexually) desirable.¹¹ At the same time, the strip club imagery associated to women dancing around and on a silver pole, brings the

¹¹ All of the pole dance teachers, entrepreneurs, performers and students I interviewed were women either in an intimate relation with a man or expressed their desire for one; and additionally, I did not find literature discussing pole dancing and sexualities.

risk of stigmatisation, and Francesca's words aptly convey the weight of the constraints on women's aesthetics and behaviour in 'normal society'. This is why she has two versions of why she began pole dancing, and why, more broadly, this activity's marketing strategies in Italy emphasise domesticity, modesty and austerity rather than sexiness and desirability. In such context, Francesca's words highlight that pole dancing provides women with a safe space, where they can perform a sexier femininity in public without polluting their respectability off-stage.¹² Hence, pole dance provides women with the experience of a space-bounded transgression of their positioning as good because chaste (i.e. respectable) women.

This gap between public and private scripts was similarly highlighted by Floriana, a pole dance entrepreneur in her late twenties, as she recounted the mixed reactions to her students' amateur performance in a public space:

Last week we participated in a street festival in town: we brought the pole platform, students danced in their uniform, and they performed some simple choreography and free style. Some [in the audience] looked at them with admiration, but others took their children away. You know, pole dance here is still seen negatively, but the truth is that there's nothing sexual in it. Everything's quite acrobatic, especially when we make events in public spaces. But obviously, the pole has that intrinsic adjective, it really has it inside, and anyway this is the reason why girls like it so much.

Like Francesca, Floriana stops short of spelling out the implicit male referent, in whose eyes a woman dancing with, around and on a vertical pole acquires a 'sexual' connotation, and speaks of the pole's 'intrinsic' characteristics instead. Such intentional downplaying conveys their awareness of the gendered stigmas associated to women's display of sexiness in public. In fact, against the UK context, where irony is used to market pole dancing explicitly as a self-sexualising activity, the public denial of pole dancing's erotic connotation seems to be an ethnographic particularity of the Italian context. Ambivalently, women consume the pleasures and power of desirability emanating from pole dancers' feminine abject (i.e. lap dancers), while at the same time dreading association

¹² In Chapters 3 and 4 I discuss how the promise that women can be both respectable and 'bitchy' is not equally accessible to all women, but is inflected by class and race.

with this abject for fear of the multifaceted stigmatisation such would entail. The following extract from my interview with Uga, another pioneering pole dance entrepreneur and teacher in Italy, aptly shows how the business of pole dancing for pleasure thrives on the intrinsic ambivalence between power and stigma, desire and fear. In response to my question about when and how she came to know pole dance, Uga stated:

I was fed up with fitness in general – all of these classes, sweating...I was looking for something else. A dear friend of mine told me: 'Why don't you do something with the pole? Didn't you see Demi Moore in *Striptease*? [(Bergman, 1996)] That's booming now!' I don't remember where he saw it - either in America or in Australia. Well, I thought, why not? And that's why I started.

At the time, Uga was a fitness trainer in a mid-range gym and in parallel she approached pole dancing. 'I started on my own and began to understand women's desire to change' she said. Uga's foresight paid off; indeed, scheduling our interview proved challenging as she juggled running her own pole dance school, running workshops and participating to public events and contests all over Italy. Eventually, we were able to squeeze the interview in during a break between classes; we sat in her school's changing room while, next door, a young Eastern European woman cared for Uga's small child.¹³ 'So, what is the difference between pole and lap dance?' I asked her, as she contributed to drawing and marketing it. At my question, Uga became exasperated: 'Every day we are associated with lap dance. No! This is not lap dance, because we are doing acrobatics!' Yet, as she said, it was 'women's desire to change' – i.e. to mimic Demi Moore's bold and intriguing stripper persona – that had led Uga to invest in this business in the first place.

In the next section I discuss how pole dance entrepreneurs and teachers in Italy managed this tension between sexuality and chastity both in their marketing strategies, and when performing pole dance shows outside of the school's homosocial context.¹⁴

¹³ In Chapter 5 I discuss migrant women's (and men's) employment as care workers in Italy.

¹⁴ In Chapter 3 I discuss this ambivalence further, specifically in relation to students doing erotic and sex work while pursuing higher education.

Managing sexuality and chastity

Pole dancing very uneasily accommodates its strip club ancestry.¹⁵ Such accommodation entails attempts to de-sexualise this ancestry by tracing alternative genealogies, such as: the Maypole; a range of East Asian disciplines, including the Chinese Pole and Mallakhamb (see for example: D'Amico, 2014; Holland, 2010); and 'the greasy pole, or the famous pole of firemen, or poles located in children's parks' (Tirabassi, 2014). For example, when I interviewed Francesca, I told her that my parents did not know that I attended a pole dance course. 'Why? Don't they understand?' she pressed me. 'Well...I don't know', I replied hesitantly, 'I mean, I'd have to explain that...' Visibly impatient, Francesca gestured that I should stop speaking, and then simulated a dialogue for managing pole dance's stigmatised ancestry with one's mother:

- Mommy I'm going to do hydrobiking.
- What it is?
- A discipline with the bike.

[she asked me] There's nothing wrong, is there?

- Mommy I'm going to do pole dancing.
- What it is?
- A discipline with the pole.

[she asked me] It's the same thing, isn't it? Your parents will never understand what 'hydrobiking' is, nor the sense of someone walking on a treadmill in the pool – you know, those strange [fitness] things...It's only the word 'pole' which bothers, so you say 'perch' instead.

Francesca's attempt to de-sexualise pole dance through an emphasis on its sporty connotations is clear in both her relativistic extension of the term 'discipline' to any fitness activity, including hydro-bike, and her use of the term 'perch' instead of pole. Recently, from such inbuilt tension between sexiness and chastity grew a different and more austere activity, i.e. 'pole fitness', which is seeking recognition as an Olympic sport (International Pole Sports Federation, 2013). Its advocates consider that achieving this status requires prior erasure of any element evoking the strip club imagery – e.g. dress code, dance styles, movements. Hence, for example, at the 2014 Pole World Cup in Brazil there was

¹⁵ For example, in 2005 the winner of the first 'Miss Pole Dance' international championship, held in Amsterdam, was later disqualified because she stripped during the performance (D'Amico, 2014a).

'a costume committee to check all entrants' outfits, with instructions to disqualify any competitors wearing heels, bikinis, thongs, leather, rubber or latex, and there were also guidelines for performance: 'Any movement relating to sex shall entail disqualification' (Speed, 2014). Pole fitness championships are flourishing in Italy as well; inasmuch as I became familiar with pole dance's acrobatic components, the skill of pole fitness performers I saw in local contests was amazing. Randomly speaking with audience members, I grasped that all women and (the few) men contestants had backgrounds either in ballet, circus or artistic gymnastics. Their careful combination of music, choreography and costumes contributed to building a range of shows that could easily translate into the theatre or circus. All performed bare footed.

High heeled shoes are, in fact, considered as particularly evocative of pole dance's strip club birth and imagery (Holland & Attwood, 2009: 174). In the UK, students reported that learning how to wear 'stripper heels' was a main reason for their enjoyment of pole dancing (Holland, 2010: 2). However, for several of my interviewees, high heels were an ambivalent prop; they were both desired and feared for the stigmatisation they can attract.

Magda is an Italian pole dance teacher and performer in her mid-thirties. She first discovered and started practicing pole dancing in Australia, where she lived for several years as a migrant worker. 'How different is it to practice pole dance here and there?' I asked her. She could not hold back her laughter when replying:

Gosh! The style is totally different. It's many, many light years away.¹⁶ There, you play much on sensuality and they don't mind if you have a strip club background. There, the heel is essential; they make you wear them right from the first class. [...] Not a tiny one: wedge heels! Movements are much more sensual – the choreographies I learnt and I'm teaching to girls are much more...I mean, there's sensuality. They're not vulgar but anyway, there is floor work

¹⁶ In Chapter 4 I discuss racialised temporality in relation to Western countries' self-construction as 'modern' and 'civilized'. In the overall conclusions of this dissertation (Chapter 6) I relate Italian people's imagination of the US as a land of sexual and economic freedom to the workings of post WWII 'sexual and economic miracle'.

[...]:¹⁷ movements that, if you perform here, they burn you at the stake! Here, we just do them behind closed doors! (h)

Magda not only confirms that the pole dance school constitutes a safe space for women to practice performing a sexier femininity, but the metaphor of the stake evokes a specific form of disciplinary surveillance, notably that operated by the Catholic Church during the Inquisition, as it burnt to death thousands of women accused of witchcraft.¹⁸ However, the danger of stigmatisation is just there, outside the school's doors, where homosociality no longer functions as a shield for the practice's erotic connotations. The ambivalent desire and fear associated with the use of 'stripper shoes' emerged in Magda's description of thinking through what shoes to wear for a commercial show in a downtown bar:

I'm about to do a night show in town wearing boots...but it's a risk! I keep wondering 'shall I wear them, shall I not?' The bar knows me already, and I aim to do beautiful choreography. I've done it already with boots...but the boot is aggressive. Yet, in Australia they use it [high heel boots] for performances. Anyway...it's just a boot! The first times I performed in Italy, I kept thinking about this till the last moment. Shall I wear it, shall I not? [...] Then eventually, I wouldn't [wear high heel boots].

Magda's hesitation in choosing her costume, as compared to the relaxed atmosphere she reportedly enjoyed in Australia, contributes to the characterisation of the Italian context as particularly inhibiting to women's public performance of sexiness. 'By the way', she added before pulling down the handle of the school's door to leave, 'I hope pole dance never reaches the Olympics.' 'Really?!' I asked surprised, 'I thought everyone wanted this to happen.' 'Not at all!' she exclaimed with laughter, and continued defiantly:

¹⁷ 'Floor work' indicates the choreographic component in a pole dance performance (e.g. dancing, strutting, twirling around, waving and rubbing one's body against the pole), which accompanies the acrobatic tricks performed on and with the pole (e.g. leverages, pulls, etc.).

¹⁸ The role of the Inquisition in disciplining women's sexuality was, for example, highlighted by Beatriz Preciado. She quotes Starhawk, a feminist and pagan witch, who considered that 'the Inquisition punished aggressiveness and pleasure in women and imposed passivity, submission, and silence on them in the domain of sexual practices' (2013: 149). An in-depth discussion of this theme goes beyond the scope of this dissertation; however, it contributes to shaping the ethnographic background in relation to the influence of the Roman Catholic Church on women's sexuality in contemporary Italy. Some resources discussing women's sexuality, witchcraft and the Inquisition in the Italian context include: Mazzone & Pancino, 2008; Muraro, 2006.

It would become a sport, like artistic gymnastics. I vote no. I'm sure that many others would vote yes here in Italy, but that would lead to removing the dance part, the femininity, the sensuality...

In the next section I discuss the properties of the femininity cultivated in pole dance schools in Italy, and the pleasures some women experience in sharing what they portray as a healing process.

Femininity as a natural healing

[I]: Did pole dancing change how you behave with others, as a woman?

Magda: It brought out my sensuality, indeed!

[I]: But didn't you have it already?

Magda: No...I mean yes, I had it but... I didn't know how, where...uhm, how to express it...how to perform it.

As Magda's words above foreground, pole dancing is both consumed and advertised as a practice enabling women to express something which, however more or less underexplored, lies naturally inside each and every woman: 'sensuality', or 'femininity'. In turn, this transformation is described as having a positive impact on a woman's relationships with others, as if such amounted to a treatment for her insecurities. This analysis is consistent with the wider scholarship on the marketing and consumption of pole dancing in other Western countries. In their discursive analysis of Australian studios' websites, Donaghue and Whitehead found that 'confidence/empowerment' were ubiquitously associated with 'sensuality', implicitly suggesting that women (ought to) feel empowered through sexiness (2011: 450). In parallel, Holland and Attwood observed that most UK pole dance students voiced the 'very adult feminine pleasure of "feeling sexy"', as well as 'achievement and confidence', as key outcomes of their practice (2009: 175-6).

Tiziana is a tall, and well-toned woman in her late twenties. Divorced with a small son, she was made redundant from her job as a kindergarten teacher and turned her passion for pole dancing into a business, full-time job and career. Like Francesca, Tiziana is now an entrepreneur, teacher and performer of pole dance. Below, she describes how both she and her students experience pole dance as a transformative and healing activity:

What gives me more satisfaction is when girls come inside here and they're shy or chubby, and tell each other 'no, I'll never be able to do that thing, no I won't do it'; or when you ask them to show what they've learnt, they shy away. In a few weeks though, they all learn to take out what they have inside: be it femininity, expressiveness, elegance, or security. [...] And you see them change, they really change here [she points to her forehead]. People who have maybe lived shyly all their lives gradually let out all that is beautiful inside them. You don't necessarily have to become a panther. I'm not a panther in my life, but when I'm on the pole I feel good. And it's the same for them; they really change outside. I see how they first come, dressed in...whatever (h)! Then slowly, slowly they start to take care of themselves. So it's really also a homeopathic medicine. It helps a lot.

Tiziana describes pole dancing as a method for reviving and expressing innate, but somewhat dormant, qualities. The inner/outer juxtaposition Tiziana uses implies that she sees femininity as a natural attribute of womanhood, which in turn presupposes a similarly natural and complementary male other.¹⁹ Queer scholars – notably Judith Butler – have argued that 'gender' is performative: 'manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body' (Butler, 1990: xv); a 'social temporality' (*ibid.*: 191), occurring within, and reproduced through, heteronormativity. However, the violence embedded in the normativity of gender roles is concealed in Tiziana's description of pole dance as a relentless but reassuringly gentle process of natural healing, a 'homeopathic medicine'.

Tiziana's underlining of where and when she can perform the 'panther' – i.e. in the school, but not 'in [her] life' – confirms that the school represents a safe space for women's performance of sexiness. Whereas in the UK this practice is explicitly advertised as a 'transformative activity', able to 'unlock the power of an inner goddess' and become 'sensual, desirable, powerful' (Donaghue & Whitehead, 2011: 451), my interviewees repeatedly emphasised the space-bounded-ness of such performance of femininity, further pointing to the Italian context's particular constraints. This is even further substantiated by an emphasis, in Italy, on pole dancing's postnatal healing; a motive not found in academic literature, but relayed by some interviewees as a driver of women's pole dance consumption.

¹⁹ Later in this chapter I discuss men, masculinity and pole dancing.

Floriana opened a pole dance school in the small town where she grew up. Differently from most of my interviewees, she is not a teacher, but a consumer of a Burlesque course taught at her school. 'How did you decide to start this business?' I asked her, knowing that previously, she had worked as an English teacher. 'I wanted to open a place where women could meet and have feminine courses only', she said, 'and in this city there were no pole dance schools yet. So I tried it.' The decision materialised as she was breastfeeding her second baby, feeling trapped in a mother-and-child cocoon:

Since I started this adventure, what I like most is that I've rediscovered the woman I was, that I had lost during maternity; I had really forgotten to take care of myself. [...] When I was twenty-four years old, before I got pregnant, I was free. I did not care about what people thought about me: if I wanted to play the bitchy one in a club, I would do it; if I wanted to play the respectable person, I would do that; if I had to be polite, I would; and if I had to tell someone off, I also would. But when I had my children, I enclosed myself in a cocoon...and women should never do that.

Here, Floriana expresses feeling claustrophobic from the loss of performative freedom associated with entering motherhood, most notably her capacity to move flexibly between the (however polarised roles of the) 'bitchy' and 'respectable' woman. Her experience of enclosure and de-sexualisation after entering motherhood prompted Floriana to establish a space where women can learn techniques for healing this injury, and recover 'the woman [she] was'; in other words, retrieving the pleasures of feeling (heterosexually) desirable.

Herself a mother, Tiziana's decision to step into the pole dance business materialised after her divorce. Similarly to Floriana, she said she was motivated to invest in a pole dance school by her desire to open a space for women, and I wondered whether there was any political motivation underneath, or beside, the commercial one. 'Where did this idea of opening a space for women come from?' I asked her. 'Well, I am a young woman and a mother' she said plainly, as if the triangulation of youthfulness, womanhood and motherhood conveyed some self-evident contradiction:

My child was still very small, and I was basically a full-time housewife – not frustrated but...desperate!²⁰ (h) So I said, 'Hey, a woman does not have to stop being a woman if she has kids or a family! She ought to take out the female [sic] that she has inside.' I've always liked this thing. The concept of a feminine space was central right from the start. And I made it! (h)

In addition to teaching in her school, Tiziana also performs commercial shows in a variety of entertainment venues – e.g. discos, pubs, bars. 'What does your husband think about your job?' I asked her, wrongly assuming that her motherhood signalled her marital status as well. 'Husband? But I don't have a husband!' she exclaimed bursting into bitter laughter,

Let's say that we separated before I knew pole dancing, and we separated because I have a far more open mentality than he does. I'm not saying that he's self-righteous – because he most likely falls within the Italian norm – but still, until now, he can't conceive of a woman with a son having a private life outside the family. So, I did three to four years like that and then I said to myself: this is not the life I want to live.

Similar to Floriana, Tiziana experienced marriage and motherhood as performatively constraining. After divorce, she turned her frustration with the austere role of the wife-and-mother, into her business's mission statement:

Especially here in Italy, we are used to the fact that once you establish a family you're a mother, and that's it. You're no longer a woman. That's the concept I'd like to debunk.

Floriana, on the other hand, did not divorce; yet, her husband did not help her avoid falling into the mother-and-child cocoon. 'But why didn't your husband help you with the kids?' I asked Floriana. 'You know what', she replied condescendingly, 'the truth is that it's your [a woman's] fault, not men's. Because even if my husband didn't wake up at night, he always told me that he could afford to pay [for help].' She then listed a number of instances when her husband offered to outsource part of her house chores and care work to a domestic worker or baby sitter. 'Women often have the need to feel omnipotent when they're not', Floriana said austerely:

They want to reach where they don't reach. But if we stepped back for a while and just looked at ourselves in the mirror...this is something that girls never do

²⁰ Tiziana is jokingly quoting the TV series 'Desperate housewives' (Cherry, 2004-2012).

when they first come in here: they never look at themselves in the mirror. Afterwards, they start bringing the tripod and the video camera: they film themselves, they look at themselves, they look at whether they did the trick well, if they're expressive... They learn to look at what they need to look at, they learn to look at their qualities and not at their shortcomings.

Adapting the Greek myth of Icarus to a women's audience,²¹ Tiziana reprimands women for attempting to transcend the constraints of their feminine embodiment, which are encapsulated by the mirror. This latter, in fact, is not only a tool to cultivate a woman's heterosexual desirability, but also a reminder of her duty thereof.

Diana Meyers discussed the persistent 'bond between woman-with-mirror imagery and narcissism' (Meyers, 2002: 115) by looking at the story of Narcissus, a man in love with (a man he did not know was) himself. In particular, she recovered a medieval version of the myth evoking the functionality of women's narcissism as a warden of male homosexuality. Here, Narcissus escaped death by sinking into the water reflecting his image, through the heterosexual re-orientation of his desire:

the medieval poem moves from identifying beauty with manhood in the figure of Narcissus and picturing love as Narcissus's rapt gaze at his reflected image to displacing the value of beauty onto a woman and redefining love as heterosexual congress. (*ibid.*: 104)

For this happy ending to be achieved, however, women need to style themselves to perform 'man's self-ideal' by taking up the mirror, beautifying themselves, and becoming narcissistic (*ibid.*: 105).

However important, learning to feel more heterosexually desirable is not the only pleasure women consume when pole dancing, as this process of trial and error is experienced amongst women who often share similar insecurities and aspirations. Although building intimacy amongst women was never mentioned as a main reason for pole dancing, several women I interviewed praised this aspect as an unexpected, enjoyable benefit. For example, Francesca reported that many of her students 'come from a love let-down that thrashed their self-

²¹ Icarus was sentenced to death by the Sun God for his unabashed attempt to transcend his human condition by flying towards the sun with wax wings.

esteem'; and through pole dancing, they entered 'a full-scale feminine space that pushed them to challenge themselves'. Floriana reportedly was more proud of the school's intimate atmosphere than its commercial success:

I just moved into this bigger location, and I have debts to pay. However, what matters is that students like it. They approach me as if I have changed their lives, and at the human level that's a big thing: because I created this space, and many girls look at it as a shelter. They can't wait to come here, it goes beyond the monthly fee, you know? Some girls come to have a coffee and then go home. It's a nice environment.

The healing potential of pole dancing that Floriana articulates exceeds the boosting of one's (heterosexual) desirability; and concern the pleasures women experience when sharing a time and space free from what she considers their natural state of war with one another:

In the beginning, I feared the idea of bringing so many women together, because, you know, women can also be a fuse. I say it in a low voice, but so far it's going well...As long as there are no men around, the competition between women tends to lessen [...] But, if you bring men in, it starts to become a bit rougher. The truth is that problems [between women] begin with the other sex, it's a hormonal problem! (h)

In her words above, the pole dance school resembles a pit stop in an all-out race for heterosexual mating. In this limited time and space, women develop more or less intimate bonds: they share tips (e.g. on self-beautification techniques), support one another during contests and shows, and cultivate friendly relations within and outside the school. At the same time, as the metaphor of the pit stop conveys, there are winners and losers in the race out there, and no opt-out option. In fact, the performance of femininity requires steady, and possibly escalating, daily work. Hence, when I asked Floriana what she thought of feminism, she initially made a relativistic disclaimer: 'like any ideology, when it becomes extreme, it turns on its head'. Immediately after saying this, she let go of her vexation with it:

A woman has to be a woman! She can't say 'I always move around the house without make-up because my husband's mine already'. If you want to keep him, forget that! You need to work as you did before marriage! Otherwise, the first twenty year old girl passing by will take him away, and fair enough! If you want to keep him, that's the way. It's not true that a woman can be sporty or forget to

be herself. Sometimes when I'm out for dinner, I look at couples and see that maybe she is wearing jeans, gym shoes and a polo shirt. I mean, she's dressed worse than him! And you think: 'fine, he's in love with you, but you look like a sewer!'

Floriana's words suggest that if a woman abdicates the daily, relentless work of self-beautification intrinsic to the position of 'woman' in heteronormativity, she is to be blamed for losing her partner out to a younger, more sexually appealing woman. 'And after he has been in love with you for ten years, and you'll still be there anywhere and anyhow', she continued 'then don't complain if he goes around doing things he shouldn't do.' Underneath her tirade against women who (think they can) neglect cultivating their heterosexual appeal, there is the distinctive ticking of time marking women's loss of value. Accordingly, she recommends that women be disciplined and live in a perpetual state of innovation in order to slow down the process of natural obsolescence (i.e. aging). In turn, this anxiety constitutes the driving force of her business. A year after the interview, I participated in the inauguration of her opening a downtown branch in a bigger, neighbouring city.

However, as I discuss in the next two sections, performing heterosexual desirability is not the exclusive reason for women's enjoyment of pole dancing. On the contrary, its practice sometimes conveys women's dissatisfaction with gender polarity, and notably with the embodiment of gracility and weakness. At the same time, as I will show, men pole dancers express uneasiness with consuming an activity traditionally performed by women, and associated to femininity.

Negotiating frailty and muscularity

You know, until now, I feel like a *figa* (beaver) when I manage to do certain things on the pole [...] It is a tough physical sport, but to endure the physical effort while maintaining or enhancing one's femininity is the most important thing. You are a strong woman, but you do it with femininity, so it is an expression of feminine strength not male strength. Many women are really blown away by being strong, being able to lift themselves from the ground with just their arms [*she simulates a falsetto voice*]: lifting up, going head down, hanging on...

Here, Francesca conveys the power she feels in displaying both femininity and physical strength. Literally, the term 'figa' means vagina; it is also a slang synonym of hottie. Hence, Francesca is alluding to her experience of power through sexiness. 'Figa' is also used as term of flattery, indicating that someone²² is either exceptionally or unconventionally good at something. In this case, Francesca is conveying self-satisfaction with achieving a physical strength that transcends the norm of feminine embodiment. At the same time, she tames the underlying defiance of the heteronormative binaries juxtaposing femininity/masculinity by invoking 'feminine strength'.

Academic literature on women practicing body building and fitness explores the tension between heteronormativity and muscularity. Muscular strength is, in fact, traditionally associated with 'the fulfilment of a certain notion of masculinity and/or virility' (Johnston, 1996: 331). Before competitions, both male and female body builders 'reduce their body fat to accentuate muscles'; however, for women, this pursuance leads to a reduction in breast size (sometimes complete elimination) and they stop menstruating (*ibid.*: 333). To tame this threat to the gender binary, 'breast implants are being used by top female body-builders to maintain femininity' (*ibid.*); in addition, femininity was included as a listed competition criterion (Boyle, 2005: 134). Shari L. Dworkin observed that women practicing fitness comply with 'a culturally produced glass ceiling' (2001: 334); in other words, they limit their cultivation of muscularity so as not to endanger their womanhood. The force of this ceiling filters through Francesca's description of the evolution of ideal femininity embodiment, which intersected with the development of the fitness industry:

Before there was this ideal of the curvy woman, like Sophia Loren.²³ Then, the time came for anorexic supermodels. Now, we have shifted to another standard of beauty, let's say, the ideal of the 2000s. [...] The new trend is a fit but feminine body. The fitness body. Well, let's not say 'fitness', because maybe that can imply extremely muscular, but...a wellness body, more or less. This image of a fit woman whose body is neither slender nor curvy. Well, maybe it is curvy, because many have fake boobs. I see images of fitness models from the US, and

²² There indeed is a male equivalent: *figo*.

²³ Sophia Loren is a famous Italian actress, one of the 'sexy stars' of the 1950s (Gundle, 2007: xviii).

all have perfectly toned bodies, but they have augmented their breasts, because you can't have it all.

Francesca's wavering between the fitness and wellness body conveys her awareness of the glass ceiling, beyond which a woman might lose her heterosexual desirability, and hence, her status as a woman. Indeed, the physical strength required for acrobatic pole dance tricks entails a transformation and augmentation of a pole dancer's muscle mass and body shape. However, most of my interviewees openly welcomed this body moulding effect.²⁴ For example, Ulrich – a teacher and performer in her early twenties – said that she was thankful for how pole dancing 'enormously changed my body. This is one of the few periods in my life when I'm truly happy with my body.' As a former ballet dancer, with a graciously slender and toned body, I wondered how her body had transformed. 'Were you ever troubled by your body weight?' I asked hesitantly, alert to the possibility of an underlying eating disorder. 'Oh no', she admitted, 'but I was too thin. Now, I've increased my muscle mass. You see, muscles not rib bones!' She laughed and continued: 'I'm satisfied with my ability to do physically demanding tricks on the pole. I've never climbed anything before – not a tree, nor a rope.'

In her questioning of biologically determinist explanations of men and women's physical strength and athletic achievements, Iris Marion Young (2005) focused on how differently they use their body and perceive the surrounding space while in motion. Women have long been socialised to live as if their body is 'a fragile encumbrance, rather than the medium for the enactment of [their] aims' (*ibid.*: 34), and when practicing sports they face a contradiction between their embodiment of 'feminine' gracility and their desire of transcending its (gendered) boundaries (*ibid.*: 32). Young continued:

For many women as they move in sport, a space surrounds us in imagination that we are not free to move beyond; the space available to our movement is a constricted space. (*ibid.*: 33)

²⁴ Such display of pride might be, at least in part, rooted in the official discourse that promotes pole dance as a discipline that enables women to become 'very strong' in order to increase their capacity to carry shopping (D'Amico, 2014b).

In Italy, such rigidity is partly rooted in Catholicism, specifically the Catholic Church's fear that a sportive woman loses interest in fulfilling her natural role of motherhood and modesty (see for example: Gori, 2004: 158; Wilson, 2011: 23). On the threshold of the 1960 Rome Olympics, the ruling political and religious authorities praised Italian women's almost complete lack of sports activity (Zonis, 2006: 83) as race-based proof of their superior femininity to 'foreign women' (*ibid.*: 78). Italy's particularly constraining heteronormativity – amidst which pole dancers (and women, more widely) negotiate sexuality and chastity, physical strength and frailty – is epitomised by the fact that the desire to 'feel like flying' was last among the nine top reasons why women should consider pole dancing (D'Amico, 2014b).

Before marriage, Tiziana was a professional athlete. 'Then I had a son', she laughed bitterly, 'and I stopped practicing sports. I played the mother's role', she continued with a nervous chuckle, 'and I lifted house weights'. Then she paused, as if the thought of her previous life as a married woman was too disturbing. 'Lately everyone tells me, "hey what shoulders you've put on... stop it!" And I say, "I'm sorry..."' she recounted, as if ashamed of her muscles. 'You know what? I can't do up any of my dresses anymore, and I'm changing bra size too.' Her concerns with the transformation of her body were palpable, hinting at her fear of no longer resembling a woman. Yet, this unsettling acknowledgement is not the whole story; underneath Tiziana's words was a hushed defiance of domesticity and of standards of feminine embodiment – i.e. gracility and passivity.

However, men are amazed that, sometimes, I have more strength than them. Well, not more, but...yes, all men are amazed. For example, last night I went to a student's birthday party and she had asked me to carry the pole platform to do something. I was unloading it from the car when her [male] friends arrived. 'We'll help you, we'll help you!' they said. 'Fine, great', I thought, 'with pleasure!' I took the platform's iron spoke, put it on my shoulder, then passed it on to one of the guys and he almost fell (h)! 'I didn't know it was so heavy...' he said. Then he stopped making those jokes you typically make when you want to measure up with others. I don't know what happened...Maybe, at first, he thought something like [she simulated a gross masculine voice] 'here she comes to do who knows what on this pole'. But then...seriously, he looked me in the eyes and said 'ah!' (h)

Tiziana hesitated to openly claim her physical strength, which would have implied a redefinition of the gender binary that attributes muscular strength to men. However, this episode also conveyed her pride at being acknowledged by men as more than a woman – i.e. heterosexually appealing, but also not weak or frail.

‘Are there any men learning pole dance in your school?’ I asked Tiziana at the end of the interview. ‘Oh yes!’ she exclaimed. The marketing of pole dancing is, in fact, also starting to address men as consumers (see for example: Holland, 2010: 160; Speed, 2014); however, during my fieldwork in Italy, I met no male trainers or students in pole dance schools. ‘And, do you know if they are heterosexual?’ I asked. ‘Oh yes!’ she first responded proudly, ‘but actually,’ she added, ‘I met some gay men who want to pole dance, and obviously they want to learn what I teach women. I mean: sensuality.’ Maliciously, she continued, ‘and why not! They’re welcome.’ Inasmuch as the pole dance school enables women to experience a time- and space-bound transgression of the wife/whore binary, Tiziana’s words also invoke the possibility that, behind closed doors, heteronormativity can be, however briefly, suspended. In public though, this possibility is yet elusive.

Nicola is a well-toned man in his early twenties. A professional trainer of martial arts and boxing (i.e. typically ‘manly’ disciplines) he also volunteers at a gym in the working-class neighbourhood where he lives and grew up. At the time, he was one of the few men participating in pole dance contests in Italy; when I was told that he also teaches it to these young men, I promptly asked for an interview. ‘What do your friends and students think of your swinging between boxing and pole dance? Did they ever call you a “faggot”?’ I asked. Homophobia is very strong in Italy (see for example: Lampugnani 2015; Genovesi 2014),²⁵ and in asking this very direct question, I knew I was touching on a ubiquitous attitude. ‘Well, yes, some say that’, he admitted, clearly bothered by the question, ‘however doing something that pushes you to question yourself can be funny and distracting.’ With ardour, he continued:

²⁵ In Chapter 4 I discuss homophobia in relation to the influence of the Roman Catholic Church on the Italian state’s discipline of prostitution and homosexuality.

But, in principle, I think the trick is that if you compromise, if you show something different or offer a different reading to people who watch *Uomini e Donne* (Men and Women) and *Amici* (Friends) every day,²⁶ I expect that in a few years' time you come back here and you've got it all by yourself without anyone teaching you from the top down, savvy?

Nicola seemingly stated that a man pole dancing (i.e. 'compromising') can help to challenge heteronormativity more effectively than speaking theories. 'Well, it's great!' I exclaimed, truly impressed, '...it's a bit queer, isn't it?' 'Yes', he stated austere, 'it's a good demonstration for the kids here'. Despite the fact that his 'kids' are just a few years younger than him, Nicola wallowed in this fatherly tone: 'Eventually, they will understand that if a man does what women usually do, it doesn't mean that he's an asshole'. 'Nor that he's not a "real man"', I added, noting that the insult he used bypassed the homophobia I was attempting to explore. 'Yeah...' he said perplexed, '...but no. That's not the thing.' Indeed, Nicola was concerned that his practice could endanger his manhood:

The point is that you shouldn't ask yourself whether he's a true man or not, but you should care for the performance itself. And understand that traversing these borders can be funny for you who are doing it, that some things that women do are beautiful and you may wish to do them too, but it does not mean that you're less a man...

A few months later, I saw Nicola perform in a local pole dance contest. His backing music was a song about men rioting against the police, and his floor work imitated military training routines (e.g. push ups). While the acrobatic pole dance tricks are performed by both women and men, the choreographic repertoire (i.e. floor work) reinforces the gender binary juxtaposing femininity/masculinity and sensuality/virility (see for example: *Female Arts Studio*, 2014). Speaking for the UK context, Holland similarly observed that pole dance for men is 'marketed as being hegemonically masculine and about "power moves", muscle building, strength and stamina' (2010: 169). Whereas Tiziana's words bring to mind, at least theoretically, the possibility of queering pole dance, Nicola's fear for his masculinity, embodied by his hyper-virile

²⁶ These are two popular, ongoing TV programmes hosted by Maria de Filippi, an Italian anchorwoman in her fifties: the first (Basile & Carcano, 1996) is a dating show and the second (Pietrangeli & Vicario, 2001) a talent show.

performance, suggests that it is not yet acceptable in the mainstream, where heteronormativity is reinforced instead.²⁷

In the next section I discuss how discontent with the narrow, complementary gender roles reproduced by heteronormativity filtered through some women pole dancers' troubled relation with their body.

Bearing with feminine embodiment

The forcefulness of the embodied constraints on feminine comportment, movement and aspirations emerged strikingly in Federica's biography. A young woman in her early thirties, Federica juggles two full-time jobs – one as a firm employee and the other as a pole dance and aerobics trainer in a gym she manages. 'But how do you cope with both?!' I asked her in awe. 'Um well', she replied, looking at me as if it was a dumb question, 'I finish my first job at 5 pm and begin my courses at the gym at 5.30.' Federica had previously been a national-level athlete, and she began teaching younger pupils when she was seventeen years old so as to not 'weigh on my father'. It became clear throughout our interview that Federica's father was a role model for her, and that she proudly claimed her role as vicariously living his ambitions: 'I resemble him a lot, and I've always done what he wanted to do but couldn't.' While she described her mother as 'overprotective', her father prompted her to pursue her (or his) ambition of undertaking an international career. It was only when she hung up a phone call, which had briefly interrupted our conversation, that I realised the person she addressed as 'darling', 'honey', 'princess' was, in fact, her mother.

Federica's intimate, courting address to her mother, along with the rejection of the domesticity she represents, and her idealisation of her father, reflects the gender polarity underlying the split between subject/object in Western culture. As I discussed earlier in this chapter, the male child achieves individuation and

²⁷ Outside the mainstream, alternative experiences do exist; including Cagne Sciolte, a feminist collective in Rome. Literally, the name translates to 'loose female dogs'; however, the feminine declination of dog (*cagna*) in Italian tends to have a sexual connotation and is also used as a synonym for 'whore'. At the end of 2013, Cagne Sciolte squatted a rundown strip club and started organising free pole dance courses, among other things, stating: 'the pole, if self-determined, is for everyone' (Laglanost, 2013).

subjectivity through domination and objectification of the (m)other. However, for the girl child the resolution of the conundrum between dependence and independence, desire and autonomy, entails the opposite: 'not the denial of the other, but the denial of the self', thereby re-enacting her early identification with the mother, entailing passivity and objectification (Benjamin, 1990: 78-79). In a strictly heteronormative scenario, reproducing a neat gender binary, a girl and adult woman's identification with her father can express a will to achieve subjectivity by transcending womanhood (*ibid.*: 104).

Federica's pursuit of her father's suggestions and ambitions, is however constrained by her own feminine embodiment, which more cogently binds her to her phallic role and motherhood. In fact, when she recounted an incident of being condescendingly told by a male university professor she highly esteemed that she was 'sincerely, just too cute to have a diplomatic career at this moment in world history',²⁸ Federica's tone of voice betrayed no annoyance. 'What did "cute" mean?' I asked her, feeling the rage mounting inside myself, 'Pretty? Tender?' 'He meant I was too physically attractive', she replied with no trace of irony or self-complacency, 'and he told me I could aspire to become the wife of an ambassador, or a girl Friday.' Rather than criticising the man who stopped her work ambitions, Federica described him as a 'very nice, very honest man', whom she truly 'appreciated for what he said'. She continued: 'Then, in time, I happened to meet a few women ambassadors, and I realised how different I am from them.' Having in the past worked closely with men and women diplomats,²⁹ I asked Federica what were the differences she felt. 'You know, sometimes career women acquire those masculine traits that I'll never be able to have', she said, 'there are choices a woman makes that imply her ceasing to be a woman – like not having children, for example.' At the time of our interview, Federica was in a relationship with a man who encapsulated the essence of 'hegemonic masculinity' (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005): a professional body builder and policeman. In the pictures she showed me, she seemed to disappear

²⁸ The professor is referring to the on-going Western 'war on terrorism' ignited by the attack to the Twin Towers in New York occurred on September 11, 2001.

²⁹ Notably, during my work as gender and development consultant, as described in Chapter 1 ('Positionality').

in his arms. Having expressed the opinion that motherhood is a woman's natural destiny, provided she wants to remain one, I wondered whether she was planning to have kids. I asked: 'Do you want to have children?' As she raised her head from her phone, I saw a glimpse of terror flash in her eyes, then she said: 'No. I have none. I wished, but I have adopted one at distance.' However, Federica is several years younger than me, and her anticipated regret for a motherhood she still could experience, but displaced 'at distance', seemed to suggest some discomfort with the femininity-motherhood nexus.

Impeccably made up, with artificial blonde shades in her hair and coloured nail polish, Federica compounded a hyper-feminine outlook and a strict discipline of her body (e.g. daily workout). Her flat I visited before her club's end of year exhibition, was saturated with objects glowing in rhinestones she decorated with her hands, piece by piece. She then left me alone to go down to the canteen, where she kept her huge collection of shoes; a collection so big, it could not fit in her large flat. Near the end of our interview, however, she let slip the pain she endured for her impossible transcendence of the gendered constraints built-on her body. She described the wide range of free activities she organised for the adolescent, young and adult women students and customers at her club: from sexual and reproductive health sessions, to sex toy parties, to photo-shoots. 'This is truly great!' I exclaimed, recognising the uniqueness of her management among all the pole dance school I visited. 'It's important to speak about the female body', she emphasised,

I care a lot for my women and girls. I don't want them to fear their body, but to live well with it. I didn't live well with my body, my femininity. I was bulimic, anorexic...I had problems. Hence, I really want them to be fine and know that can speak to me about anything that might happen to them.

Susan Bordo contextualised the proliferation of eating disorders (e.g. anorexia nervosa, bulimia) in Western countries, from the 1980s onwards, amidst the tension between the consumerist drive to self-indulgence and the promotion a self-disciplined body ideal by diet and fitness industries (1993: xxi). According to Bordo, many women experience the pursuance of the 'slenderness ideal' as 'a

rejection of the fifties ideal of cuddly, reproductive womanhood, and an assertion of a post-feminist, non-domestic identity' (*ibid.*), whereas instead

taking on the accoutrements of the white, male world may be experienced as empowerment by women themselves, and as their chance to embody qualities – detachment, self-containment, self-mastery, control – that are highly valued in our culture. (*ibid.*)

The tensions underlying gender polarity also strongly emerged in Carla's biography, a pole dance entrepreneur and trainer in her early thirties. I visited Carla in her home and, after an ice-breaking chat, she led me to her bedroom where she wished to be interviewed. Surrounded by goth and punk posters full of skulls, blood, chains and zombies, she insisted I sit on her vibrating leather chair and pulled a stool to sit on in front of me. Before opening her own pole dance school, Carla used to work as a nurse in the ER of a public hospital located in a working class neighbourhood of an industrial city. 'That was tough!' I exclaimed, 'Injuries, blood, death...gosh, I couldn't do it!' 'Yes it was tough, she replied proudly,

but I chose it. When I was still doing my internship, they sent me to the geriatric row, but I did not like it. I liked the ER, and I used to go there secretly for night shifts. It has always been a fixation of mine; I saw it as a tough place reflecting my character. Understand? Reflecting who I am. And at the same time, I connect this to the pole. But not to the pole like: you stay there, you're quiet, sensual, etc. [I associate it] with the tough things, the danger, the adrenaline. Get it?

I saw Carla performing live in a seaside resort bar, and her show was shockingly full of dangerous acrobatic tricks. Yet, her recklessness did not allow her to transcend a body size that did not comply with the slenderness ideal. Its gendered gravity effect was crystallised in a package of Brazilian slimming pills next to which I placed my recorder. As if my gesture had flipped a switch, Carla grabbed the green plastic box and waved it in my face. Gradually lowering her voice, as her tone shifted from excitement to frustration, she said:

I got this fixation because, some time ago, I performed in a disco and towards the end [of the performance], I slipped down the pole. At the end of the show the disco owner told my manager: 'hey: don't you let her dance anymore, ok?!' And he described me like this...

At the end, Carla inflated her cheeks and stretched her arms wide-open to simulate the body size of an obese woman. Sharing a pain I myself experienced as an adolescent, for my oversized-ness, I could not find the words to tell her 'weight does not matter'. Instead, she said it, when I told her that one of the reasons I stopped pole dancing was because I felt too heavy to lift myself up.

Carla and all pole dance entrepreneurs and teachers I interviewed frequently stressed that 'anyone can pole dance': young and adult women, thin and fat, sporty and not. Nevertheless, this all-inclusive marketing message coexists with a pressure that even Carla felt obliged to comply with, the slender body ideal, driving her to buy slimming pills promising to burn fat fast. Carla's body weight had daunted her from a young age: as a girl, her ballet teacher discouraged her from pursuing dance any further due to her body. 'I had too many kilos and I was ashamed, so I stopped going.' Refused for her incomppliance with standards of feminine embodiment, Carla then turned to 'masculine' sports. 'I started going to the gym', she said, and then growled while mimicking a body builder lifting a huge dumbbell. 'My boyfriend was a basketball trainer, so afterwards I did basketball, handball. Very cool! I also played women's rugby for a while.' In response to my asking how she became interested in pole dance, Carla said:

You know, I've always considered myself a massive lass, and anyway, I always had muscles. I am not syphilitic, I always liked the muscle and I found pole dance to be really acrobatic, crazy and, (h) maybe it doesn't matter to most, but to me the risk factor [...] it's part of my character, ok? I mean, I am not a flimsy girl. Pole dance seemed to me a bit of everything: risk, craziness, acrobatics, dance, movement, sensuality. Then sensuality-wise, one tries to do whatever one can; I mean...not all of us have it. But with this sport, I tell you, even if you say 'I go to hoe!'³⁰ (h), eventually anyone can turn out to be at least a bit sensual in one way or another.

According to Carla's words, pole dance's promise to boost heterosexual desirability seems more like something she had to bear rather than an impetus. She seemed more attracted to the opportunity to move in a space where she

³⁰ In Italian the expression 'go to hoe (the land)!' is used to suggest that someone would better go back doing humble tasks, as 'cultivating the land' supposedly is. Besides bearing implications for class-based positioning in the rural/urban binary, 'hoeing' requires much physical strength; hence it is usually considered a 'male' activity. Therefore, Carla meant that unless you're a *man*, any woman can learn to 'express' a bit of 'sensuality'.

could cultivate and show her physical strength, muscularity, bravery, and recklessness in defiance of gender polarity. At the same time, her rejection from commercial pole dance shows that her oversized-ness – which translates into a failure of compliance with normative body standards for women – rebounds her to a femininity with which she cannot, or will not, comply.

Meanwhile, Carla's acknowledgement of the centrality of a woman's heterosexual desirability in commercial pole dance employment in mixed entertainment venues blurs the border separating pole dancers from lap dancers, exposing the former to the multifaceted stigmas enwrapping the latter (i.e. their feminine abject). In the next section, I discuss how this risk of stigmatisation prompts pole dancers to articulate their position as chaste (i.e. respectable) feminine subjects.

Cultivating desirability amidst gendered stigmas

Zara is a young Italian woman in her mid-twenties; she has been fond of sports since childhood, and currently teaches and participates in both aerobics and pole dance contests. She also recently began performing commercial pole dance shows in night entertainment venues. As most women I interviewed and encountered during fieldwork, Zara was wary of the stigmatising assumptions potentially underlying my research questions. Although she quickly consented to an interview, when we met she first started with mine.

'So how did you come to know pole dance?' I eventually managed to ask her after I responded to all her questions, thinking she would now, eventually feel confident enough to let go of her suspicion. 'Out of curiosity', she said, shrugging her shoulders.

Five-six years ago, I saw news of courses taught in the US, so I checked online but there were none in Italy, anywhere. After a while I gave up. I thought 'it will never reach here!' Because we have the Vatican next door and I thought 'If they let us do something like that, it will never be looked at positively!' But instead, I was proved wrong.

Aside from the fleeting moral panic awakened by Sexgate (see Chapter 1), in Italy there is a steady and powerful entity that meticulously and ubiquitously divides women into good and bad, chaste and promiscuous: the Catholic Church. Voiced by Zara in the extract above, and foregrounded by the invisibility enwrapping Filomena and Diana (see Chapter 1), the Catholic Church's claustrophobic influence can be seen throughout my dissertation. In a cultural context where the marketing strategy of a practice steeped in eroticism instead emphasises its chaste and domestic aspects, it is clear that women's consumption of pole dancing cannot be reduced to binaries juxtaposing compliance and resistance, objectification and empowerment.

Similar to some pole dance entrepreneurs and teachers whose words I reported earlier in this chapter, Zara reported the pleasures entailed in transcending standards of feminine gracility, challenging gravity laws, and establishing supportive ties amongst women. 'When I started, the teacher told me: "Go upside down!" And I said "What?!"' she said, laughing about her early days, 'but I kept trying stubbornly. I told myself: "I have to make it because she told me I can." And indeed [I made it], and then I fell in love with it.'

Nonetheless, however insistently I tried asking why she was attracted to this practice in the first place, she kept shielding behind its sporty connotation. 'When you saw it on YouTube, what made you say "wow, that's cool"? I asked her, for example. 'Probably the fact of hanging, lifting up, not to stay with your feet on the ground,' she said laughing, 'and the gymnastics. I am always enraptured by artistic gymnastic competitions: rings, parallel bars.' Seeking an indirect way to bypass her defensive curtain, I eventually asked whether she enjoyed performing pole dance shows. At this question, her eyes sparked and her voice shook with excitement:

OOOOOH Yes! Pole dance shows are beautiful [...] When you arrive in a disco and you start assembling the pole, people come in and look at you as if you were a bitch, you hear them whistling and commenting: 'who knows what the hell she's doing!' (h) Then after your first trick, everyone's like 'Wow!' Everyone looks at you with admiring eyes. That's the biggest satisfaction of my life. (h) It's awesome when you manage to silence them. You say: 'So what? Did you see

that?!' (h) It is self-evident that it is not about being provocative, but is a full-scale physical activity; it is worked at, studied, and exhausting, and not everyone can do it at the top level from the start, you need to study hard...

Is it pride in the public acknowledgement of her athletic skills that makes pole dancing so valuable to Zara? Is it her sporty merits that her audience so intensely admires? Is not the pleasure of feeling intensely desired by (at least some members of) her audience a part of what makes a show Zara performs for money so enjoyable to her? And if so, why can she not express it?

I argue that behind Zara's systematic denial of the pleasures she enjoys in being recognised as (hetero)sexually desirable by an anonymous audience – as encapsulated by my concept of 'pleasure' – lies her fear of being stigmatised as a whore and/or a woman mistaking her sexual objectification for empowerment. Therefore, similar to Francesca, Uga, and other women I interviewed, Zara invokes the sporty, austere component of pole dancing to distance herself from women who explicitly capitalise on their heterosexual appeal, their erotic capital.

In the next and concluding sections, I show how pole dancers who had previously worked as lap dancers experienced and handled such distancing.

Desirability, abjection, and the respectable feminine subject

'How old are you?' I asked Eleonora to break the ice as I turned on my audio recorder. It was a summer evening and we had met in a trendy, hipster pub of her choosing. 'Thirty-nine', she replied dryly. 'Then we're almost peers!' I said, searching for common ground. I was feeling a bit intimidated by Eleonora's gaze, because the situation here was slightly unusual: I had not asked to meet her, it was she who contacted me to let me know she wanted to be interviewed. As I was already aware of pole dance entrepreneurs and teachers' frustration with comparisons to lap dancing, I had assumed that she wanted to shut down any discussion like this; she wanted the last word. 'But we look younger', I continued, 'it must be because we're not married!' Eleonora, however, could not be bothered with my clumsy attempts to relate to her. 'No, no, no', she said

dismissively, and began replying to a question I never asked, 'the truth is that I started to do pole from lap'.

Now a fitness trainer and pole dance instructor, Eleonora paid her way through university as an acrobatic stripper. Somewhere in her life journey, she decided to become a fitness trainer and possibly own her own gym. 'It wasn't easy', she said, speaking about the long period during which she spent eight hours a day working on and with her body to become certified, 'I stopped working and sometimes I was totally penniless'. However pricey, Eleonora could earn the equivalent of the certification course's monthly fee in just a weekend's work as acrobatic stripper. 'But why did you stop working?' I asked, thinking that sporadic work could have helped her buffer expenses. 'Well...' she sighed, visibly caught unprepared, 'because it is not compatible with pole dancing, you can't do it.' 'Why?' I insisted, 'did anyone tell you that??' 'Oh no! Never, but...' She then described the physical endurance she had to cultivate and the hard work on her body, as if such discipline alone attested the presumed incompatibility between pole and lap dancing. After concluding her technical description, she continued: 'I don't regret anything, I'd do everything again as I did'. Then she paused briefly, visibly rapt in the feelings arising from her past. 'Well, actually, stopping was a big sacrifice', she said, 'Now I have to wake up at 7.30 a.m. to teach [fitness courses] for people who come [to the gym] just out of boredom!'

The boredom Eleonora felt with the ordinariness of teaching, betrayed her nostalgia for the power she felt when men paid to watch her dance in night clubs. Coupled with her request to sit with me for an interview, the immediacy with which she disclosed this information indicated her need to share a burdening secret and her desire to breathe again as a whole. However, to inhabit the space she (also, or now) longed for, she felt compelled to split and conceal her lap dancing past so as not to stain the reputation of the school she worked for; a concern for anonymity she understandably stressed repeatedly.³¹

³¹ In Chapter 1 ('Ethics') I described the procedures I followed to grant anonymity to my interviewees.

The interview gradually slipped into a friendly conversation, and it was late at night when we said goodbye. I insisted on paying our bill as a sign of my gratitude for her time and the intimate information she had entrusted me with, someone she had only just met, by disclosing her 'shameful' past. In the act of paying, however, I suddenly felt embarrassed. I realised I was, unintentionally, reproducing a familiar setting; a setting she was distancing herself from – i.e. a night entertainment venue where (male) customers bought time to be in her company.³² This realisation crossed both our minds, and we froze while considering who exactly were we to one another then and who we would be once I left with her story on my audio recorder. Smiling, and silently looking in each other's eyes, we agreed that no, this was not the same: I did not buy her story; it was she who had invited me to interview her in the first place; and I would share her story carefully, for a shared purpose.

A message from Anonymous: I don't have a problem w/strippers and if u wanna sell ur body to gross men that's ur choice BUT pole dancing isn't stripping, pole takes ATHLETIC SKILL, im not just shakin my ass n picking up two-dollar bills w/my vagina. just because I pole dance 4 fitness and 2 express myself creatively doesn't mean i want ppl to assume i'm a trashy bimbo w/daddy issues.

Reply: Wow! You packed so much in here. First of all, I'm not selling my body to gross old men. [...] And then, if you're talking to me, you know my stance on pole dancing. You know that Western appropriation narratives aside, the reason you want pole dance specifically to be your fitness routine and not mallakhamb (which doesn't welcome women anyway) or aerialism, is that neither have been sexy and appealing background props setting the standards of female desirability for the past twenty years. Strippers have. You want to look like a stripper. You want that slumming, dangerous, mysterious aura, you want to walk with confidence like I walk in 8" heels, you want to look like men pay you hundreds of dollars because you're desirable. You want to feel edgy and desirable. [...] You want our aura and desirability and not the stigma, not the danger, not the real threat of losing homes/jobs/family/scholarships/children/careers/futures. You know that the edginess you crave comes at a price, and your way of dealing with this is NOT to combat stripper stigma, your way of dealing with this is to play up respectability politics for all you're worth, widening the dichotomy between pure you and filthy us, too busy selling our bodies to dirty old men to develop the skills and grace you so admire....(Clarawebbwillcutoffyourhead, 2014)

³² I describe lap dancers' and acrobatic strippers' job and work earnings in Chapter 4.

Eleonora sent me the link to the above blog post weeks after our interview, without any comment. I interpreted her action as a sign of the pain she endures for abjecting her powerful stripper persona, to conform to the aura of austerity and chastity foregrounded by pole dancing in Italy. The 'respectability politics' highlighted by this angry blogger stands for pole dancers' attempt to ride the coattails of strippers' 'edginess', appropriating their desirability, while also (more or less) intentionally exacerbating strippers' stigmatisation.

In Chapters 3 and 4 I discuss how the position of the respectable feminine subject, which many pole dancers assume to ward off the gendered stigmas marking their feminine abject, both prompts and reproduces multifaceted othering processes inflected by class, race and sexuality.

Conclusions

In this chapter, I have shown that pole dance's commercial success in Italy sheds light on the tensions associated with women's heteronormative subjectification, specifically the split between good and bad women, i.e. chaste and asexual vs. sexual but despised. After comparing my findings with existing scholarship on women's practice of pole dancing in other Western countries, I have characterised the Italian context as particularly constraining in terms of women's sexuality. In fact, pole dancing marketing strategies in Italy emphasise its domestic orientation rather than women's empowerment through sexiness. Some pole dance entrepreneurs and teachers who wished to, discretely, reclaim such sexiness used the term 'femininity' instead. As a result, femininity is naturalised as a core attribute of womanhood, which the practice of pole dancing can heal or help to express.

Pole dancing for pleasure reveals the complex tensions the women I interviewed navigated as they consumed and sold a practice entailing grace and physical strength, desirability and stigmatisation. They move in a field saturated with heteronormative binaries juxtaposing wives and mothers with 'whores'; 'feminine women' and 'virile men', in whose eyes they seek confirmation of their status as women (i.e. their heterosexual desirability). Most expressed uneasiness at the social pressure to fit within these narrow binaries, pushing

them to claim austerity and respectability in order to perform a sexier femininity in public and accept the embodiment and performance of femininity as part of the practice of pole dancing.

Caught between their yearning to be desirable, market opportunism and a particularly conservative society, in the next chapters I show how many pole dance entrepreneurs and teachers articulated their positioning as respectable women in order to enjoy more freedom to perform roles to which they were, however ambivalently, attracted. Although only marginally discussed in feminist scholarship debating sexualisation in contemporary Western cultures, I put the polyvalent meanings and implications of 'respectability' centre stage, along with the class-based, racialised and sexualised othering processes underlying the construction of the respectable feminine subject.

To this end, I enlarge the analytic field to include women that, for various reasons, are positioned as pole dancers' feminine abjects: erotic and sex workers, as well as migrant women.

Chapter 3. Social class dis/identification in erotic dancing: between pleasure and work

'Zezaaaa! Come here. Come!'

Nadia interrupted me to shout at a slender woman with long, wavy, black hair in a black stretch dress who was passing next to us at Charlie's Bar, a summer disco in the outskirts of a mid-sized industrial city in the Po Valley. It was mid-June, and entertainment venues were opening their outdoors for the summer season. That night, Charlie's inaugurated a collaboration with Sexy Moon, a renowned night club. Entry was free, and women were welcomed as stand-alone customers.¹ However, when my friends and I entered, we were completely dismissed by the young women in pink bikinis, rushing to greet instead all the men entering. In her late forties, heavily made up and quite robust, Nadia was Sexy Moon's anchor-woman – a status signalled by her silky blue zoot suit instead of a lap dancers' pink uniform. I approached her in a break between two erotic shows, and disclosed my researcher identity. Sometime in the middle of explaining my fieldwork plan, Nadia intercepted Zeza by shouting louder than the thumping disco music, to which no-one danced. Nadia summoned Zeza to join us and exclaimed, 'Zeza can speak to you about pole dance and lap dance for hours!' Nadia stretched her right arm to embrace Zeza's thin, bare shoulders; then, grabbed my large, built shoulders with her left arm and pushed us both away from the bar. 'Now go on that sofa and talk', she said briskly, 'Bye.'

We were both puzzled by this abrupt introduction, but Zeza was also evidently nervous. As soon as we sat down she asked: 'Why do you research these things?' It was only after a thorough explanation of my research project, and a demonstration of my insider knowledge of pole dance, that she felt confident revealing that she was now a pole dancer, but she had worked before as a lap dancer. 'How would you explain the difference between pole and lap dancing?' I eventually asked. 'Lap dance is fun, seductive, something playful...' she said sparkingly, while eying lap dancers on the stage behind me. In a hastened but

¹ As noted in Chapter 1 ('Lap dancers and acrobatic strippers') in Italy, women are generally prevented from entering night clubs as customers unless they are accompanied by a man, who is implicitly entrusted with their guardianship.

naughty whisper, she added: 'and then, there is the stripping'.² 'Pole dance instead is a sport', she stated. After a brief pause, she straightened her spine and continued: 'In Italy few people understand this difference, but maybe researches like yours will help clarify things once and for all.' We then spoke about the hard body work necessary to perform pole dance's acrobatic trick, and Zeza told me about an accident her friend had while practicing at home.³ 'This is why I stopped', I told her, 'I was travelling a lot for work and I couldn't catch up with my peers. I feared injuring myself.' 'So what is your job, exactly?' Zeza asked suspiciously. Assuming that she now doubted my researcher credentials, I explained that I occasionally work as a freelance consultant in order to support myself throughout my PhD. 'And what is yours?' I asked her in return, hoping to downplay the sudden shift in power between us. 'I work in service provision', she replied vaguely. 'In which area?' I insisted, unaware of the discomfort concealed by her vagueness. 'I am ashamed to tell you', she said looking me squarely in the eye. Struck by her admission of vulnerability, I resumed our conversation on pole dancing, but our spell of intimacy was irretrievably dissolved. 'Now I have to go', she said while standing up. 'Can I call you to continue the interview elsewhere?' I asked tentatively. 'Yes you can', she said. She jotted her phone number on my agenda and saved mine in her phone, then warned: 'but I don't know when I'll be able to meet you.' After few failed attempts to fix another time, I understood that her procrastination was concealing discomfort. Mindful of the shame she felt, which I regretted unintentionally igniting, I stopped contacting her.

At the end of the summer I attended the inauguration of a new pole dance school in a small town in the middle of the Po Valley. Daniela, the school's owner and herself a teacher, had invited students from a neighbouring school to perform a free showcase. The theatre was packed with the performers' boyfriends, husbands, children, relatives and/or friends, but there was also a

² In Chapter 5 I discuss women erotic workers' ambivalent experience of the power of their heterosexual desirability and the despise emanating from gendered and racialised stigmas.

³ Many pole dance students buy a pole for home use and install it in the sitting room – a trend also occurring in other countries (Perilli, 2015). There is now a flourishing market for these fitness items (see for example: Pleasure Poles, 2015; X-Pole, 2015).

crowd of women – mainly in their twenties and thirties – who peeped in to look at the new discipline coming to town. ‘So what is the difference between pole dance and lap dance?’ a distinguished young anchor-man in black suit and red tie asked Daniela, lifting his eyes from the script in his hand. ‘Gosh!’ she puffed back at him, in apparent exasperation, ‘I’ve already answered this question a thousand times!’ She dropped her arms disconsolately on the tight, sleeveless, short black sheath dress she wore with black high heels. She then turned her face to the audience and, realising our expectant silence, turned back to him, put her hands on her hips and asked disdainfully: ‘Why do you ask this question? Do we look like strappone?’ I, and likely most of the audience, was unaware of the literal meaning of this last word, but not its metaphorical meaning: whore.⁴ Laughs, claps, and whistles greeted Daniela’s haughty response. ‘The difference is in the context’, she explained patiently, ‘At the school, we do it to have fun and for sport; they do it for money, for other scopi.’ Meaning both goals and fucking, Daniela’s explanation suggested that lap dancers sold sex, and deserved despise. The roaring that followed Daniela’s response signalled hers as the last word in this duel-like morality sketch. Both then walked off the stage and a group of students entered in chaste white cotton outfits and bare feet, who then performed a mildly acrobatic show to the tune of a sappy love song. To my surprise, I saw Zeza dancing among them, and I immediately wondered if she had heard Daniela’s scornful remark about lap dancers. Watching her twirl around a silver pole on the stage to the applause of a mixed audience, I realised what she feared to lose should her ‘shameful’ lap dancing past be made public. I know she saw me at the buffet following the performance, but I respectfully complied with her desired oblivion.

As shown in the ethnographic vignettes above, the shift of an erotic dance performed by women in male-patronised strip clubs to a consumer market (overwhelmingly) appealing to middle-class women unmasks some of the tensions emerging at the crossroads of the sexualisation of culture and the

⁴ I later discovered, via word-of-mouth, that the term is jargon for a woman who is excessively active in sex, as conveyed by the metaphor of tearing apart (strappare) the penis’ fraenum.

‘mainstreaming of the sex industry’ (Brents & Hausbeck, 2010: 9). For Giovanna, the forcefulness of the binary juxtaposition of virtuous pole dancers and despicable lap dancers is central to her business, as it enables her to market pole dance as an activity suitable for middle-class (i.e. respectable) women. For Zeza, this binary compels her to conceal her lap dancing past in order to pass for the virtuous pole dancer, and partake in the glamour surrounding the practice of pole dancing for pleasure.

Indeed, scholarship addressing pole dancing unanimously contextualises its commercial success within the glamour surrounding different forms of recreational strip-teasing – e.g. neo-Burlesque – and the gentrification of some sex-related markets, notably the rebranding of strip clubs as gentlemen’s clubs (Owen, 2012: 84; see also Colosi, 2012: 21; Brents & Hausbeck, 2010: 9; Holland & Attwood, 2009: 166; Egan, 2006: 10). At the same time, the events involving Zeza show that women who dance erotically for money, rather than for pleasure (i.e. as consumers), continue to be stigmatised (see also: Price-Glynn, 2010: 35; Holland & Attwood, 2009: 174). Analogously, Elisabeth Bernstein observed that some niches of the sex markets in (some) Western, post-industrial cities are becoming more ‘respectable’ due to the increasing participation of the middle classes – as both consumers (e.g. porn movies, sex toys, strip clubs) and providers of erotic and sexual services (2007a) – while others, especially street-based sex work, continue to be stigmatised and repressed by the state (Bernstein, 2007b: 4; see also: Brents & Hausbeck, 2010: 15).⁵

The aim of this chapter is to unpack the class-based assumptions underpinning the position of the respectable feminine subject, as shown by the contradictory subject positions women articulate as they shift from being consumers of pleasure practices to performing such practices professionally, within a context of increasing economic insecurity. In so doing, I pursue a discussion of the meanings of women’s sexualisation beyond the sexual objectification/empowerment binary outlined in Chapter 2.

⁵ In Chapter 4 I discuss the Italian prostitution laws, gendered and racialised employability patterns and migrant women and M2F sex work.

I begin with a discussion of the hierarchies of social and economic value reproduced through the normalisation, glamorisation or stigmatisation of different brackets of the erotic and sex markets in contemporary sexualised culture. In particular, I discuss the gendered and class-based assumptions underlying respectability in relation to symbolic processes of social class dis/identification (Skeggs 1997) and 'distinction' (Bourdieu 1984). Next, I show how pole dance entrepreneurs and teachers – who generally approached this practice first as consumers – claim their position as respectable feminine subjects to negotiate their performance and display of sexiness in public.

As Daniela's words above show, however, claiming respectability entails articulating distinction from the despised feminine abject, i.e. women dancing for work and money, as metonyms of the figure of the whore. Shifting the discussion to women abjectified by respectability, i.e. erotic and sex workers, I then engage with the feminist sex wars debate on agency in prostitution/sex work, highlighting how class informs moral-laden hierarchies of un/worthy jobs, pleasures and pains, in a context of increasing economic precarity.

Sexualisation, glamour and respectability

The sexualisation of mainstream culture (McNair, 2002: 12) and the 'mainstreaming [of] sex' (Attwood, 2009) are two broad labels under which scholars from a wide range of disciplines discuss the increasing visibility, accessibility and consumption of recreational sex in Western countries, including: the ubiquitous accessibility and increasing consumption of pornography; the glamour surrounding porn stars; people's production and circulation of 'their own sexual images and texts often for pleasure rather than profit'; the gentrification of commercial sex; the revival of Burlesque; and the popularity of pole dancing for fitness (Attwood, 2009: xiii-xv). Brian McNair famously coined the term 'striptease culture' to indicate the proliferation of 'media of sexual revelation and exhibitionism' that 'make up a culture in which public nakedness, voyeurism, and sexualized looking are permitted, indeed encouraged as never before' (2002: ix).

Contemporary debates on the sexualisation of culture's meaning for, and impact on, gender and sexuality are rooted in the feminist 'sex wars' – i.e. the 1980s split between second wave Western feminists around 'the role of sexuality in women's liberation and oppression' (Chapkis, 1997: 11). For radical feminists, pornography was 'an institution of male supremacy' that acted as 'propaganda for and a tool of sexual suppression of women' (Wilson & Dworkin, 1982: 25-26); while sex radical feminists considered it also as a tool 'to enhance sexual exploration and diversity' (Chapkis, 1997: 30). In the wake of this everlasting debate, Ariel Levy recently described Western culture as a 'raunchy culture' imbued with 'the sleazy energy and aesthetic of a topless club or a *Penthouse* shoot' (2006: 26), propagating sexually objectified women as role models for mass emulation (*ibid.*: 196). On the opposite end, Brian McNair posited the current proliferation of sexualised imageries as 'an index of sexual democratization' (2002: 12) catalysed by the evolution of pornography.

Conversely, looking at symbolic processes of social class dis/identification (Skeggs 1997) and 'distinction' (Bourdieu 1984) reproduced through sexualised culture provides an alternative framing of this debate; one which moves beyond the binary juxtaposition of women's sexual objectification and empowerment, oppression and liberation. Hence, it entails looking at how 'taste' (Bourdieu, 1984) affects the production and circulation of value associated with different sex-related texts and practices in Western countries. For example, several authors have shown that the difference between erotica and pornography is largely dependent on the consumer's class status rather than actual content, and the negative judgment attributed to the latter is intrinsically related to its working class circulation (see for example: Philpott & Ferris, 2013: 201; Deller & Smith, 2013; McNair, 2002: 52). Similarly, figures of sexually empowered women circulating in mainstream media reflect a particular middle-class aesthetic and lifestyle, and depend on the simultaneous rejection of working-class-ness represented by 'the production of a "white trash" figure of the "slut"' (Attwood, 2006: 10-11).

The relationship between respectability, middle-class-ness and women's sexual behaviour was forged into an ideology in the eighteenth century, during the political and economic ascendancy of the bourgeoisie. Born in England and Germany, the ideology of respectability provided middle classes with an austere behavioural code and aesthetic that both produced and sought to convey their distinction from the "idleness" of inferior classes and the debauchery of nobility' (Mosse, 1996: 5). Sexual moderation and self-restraint was recommended for both men and women, but the norms disciplining women were much stricter⁶ and entailed a trade-off between 'domesticity and sexuality', so much so that "women of the streets" became a euphemism for prostitution' (Skeggs, 1997: 46-47). For a bourgeois woman, the embodiment of respectability conveyed her class status, the morality of her sexual conduct, and her distance from working-class women, who were considered as 'sexual, vulgar, tarty, pathological and without value' (*ibid.*: 115). For working class women who could not afford seclusion in domesticity, as they had to work outside of the home, respectability was an unattainable aspiration and a discourse promoting their otherness and subordination to the ruling middle class. In particular, their display of sexuality – in their aesthetic and/or behaviour in public – exacerbated their otherness vis-à-vis middle-class, respectable women.

In her longitudinal ethnographic study on white, working-class women in north-west England between the end of the 1980s and early 1990s, Beverly Skeggs highlighted how such women sought to 'dis-identify' from working-class-ness, due to its historical association with 'all that is dirty, dangerous and without value' (*ibid.*: 74):

Class was central to the young women's subjectivities. It was not spoken of in the traditional sense of recognition – I am working class – but rather, was displayed in their multitudinous efforts not to be recognized as working class. They disidentified and they dissimulated. Theirs was a refusal of recognition

⁶ In Chapter 4 I discuss how the viability of such standards of morality relied on a group of social abjects (i.e. women prostitutes) who could absorb men's sex drive exceeding marriage – thereby contributing to preserve the chastity of respectable women, and its associated value on the middle class marriage market – and cultivate men's heterosexual orientation.

rather than a claim for the right to be recognized. It was a denial of the representations of their positioning. (*ibid.*)

Against the background of working-class women's centuries-old vilification, Skeggs found that women used glamour as 'a way of holding together sexuality and respectability', enabling the transposition of 'the marks of middle-class respectability [...] onto the sexual body' (*ibid.*: 110). Hence, they could 'negotiate being glamorous and desirable – to which they all aspire – whilst not being marked as rough and common' (*ibid.*: 110). With this in mind, it is possible to read women's contemporary emulation of porn stars, strippers and raunchy celebrities' sexualised aesthetics and practices as a means of dis-identifying with the anonymity of working-class-ness. For example, in her research on white, working-class, British women working as lap dancers in Tenerife, Esther Bott observed:

The women of this study can be said to be finding access to a reputable, recognizable and, in and through their own value placements and disidentifications, *respectable* femininity through their dissimulation with ordinariness, sexlessness and failure to escape. The young British lap dancers can embody another version of idealized femininity, that of the long-haired, made-up, slim and attractive, recently waxed and bronzed beauty. (2006: 31)

However ambivalently, glamour provides an apparently democratic and accessible 'source of self-definition and empowerment' via artifice and self-transformation while, at the same time, contributes to reproducing class-based hierarchies (Gundle & Trini Castelli, 2006: 14) which affect access to, and consumption of, sex-related practices. As Brents and Hausbeck argued,

the pornographication of culture is about upscale, trendy culture. Criticisms of the sex industry businesses, especially prostitution, center on classed images: images of seedy strip clubs attracting lower-class criminals, or lower-class, drug-addicted, often minority streetwalkers. (2010: 15)

Rooted in an acrobatic evolution of sexy dance routines performed by women paid to entertain working-class men in 'seedy' strip clubs, and hence stigmatised for both their promiscuity and class positioning, pole dancing would have to rebrand itself as a respectable activity in order to become appealing and accessible to middle-class women. However, as shown at the start of this

chapter, such respectability-claiming processes rely on the stigmatisation of women who perform for money rather than pleasure.

In the next section, I show how pole dance entrepreneurs and teachers – most of whom, as highlighted in Chapter 2, first approached this activity as consumers – negotiated, through markers of middle-class respectability, their access to and consumption of a practice entailing mimicry of their feminine object.

Managing respectability and sexuality through glamour

After several months of fieldwork, I had become acquainted with both pole dance performers' acrobatic skills and the ever expanding variety of dance styles they combined in their routines. Commenting on the burgeoning market diversification, Carla said, 'There are lots of new videos on "contemporary pole" lately'. She then searched YouTube to show me some videos: 'Do you see how she moves? With one leg first and then with the other? Like when you do *plié* at the bar?' As a child, Carla dropped ballet because her teacher thought she was too 'fat',⁷ yet part of her still longed to embody a ballerina's grace in movement. 'Did you see that?' she kept repeating, as dancers performed on the computer screen in front of us, 'they can't say that you're a stripper, you know? I mean, look at that: you make such classical, contemporary movements!' As Carla spoke, it was as if she was proving something that had long been unfairly questioned.

The parallel Carla drew between pole dancing and ballet, along with the former's shift from the strip club to the classy theatres of the latter, was an attempt to fend off the whore stigma and claim pole dance's respectability. Significantly, both modern dance and ballet acquired their status as respectable art forms by developing, throughout the twentieth century, a 'middle-class gender ideology' that diminished 'the identification of dancer as a woman of questionable moral status who erotically displayed her body' (Hanna, 2010: 213). Similarly, middle-class women's access to and consumption of body building – an activity entailing the display of a woman's almost fully naked body

⁷ I discussed Carla's troubled relation with her body size in Chapter 2.

to an anonymous, mixed audience – was pursued through a respectability-building process that entailed this practice's discursive de-sexualisation:

Although athletes are tacitly expected to exude a certain amount of (hetero)sexual appeal in their posing routines and magazine images, they risk being stigmatized as cheap, classless, or immoral if they exceed the boundaries of middle-class sexual morality. [They] protect themselves against such a fall from grace by constructing a stereotypical counterimage of the stripper. (Boyle, 2005: 145-146).

Likewise, strippers/lap dancers represent pole dancers' despised other – i.e. sexually promiscuous, vulgar, and idle women. These negative connotations are consistent with the stereotypes historically used by the middle classes to articulate their distinction from the working class (men and women) and women prostitutes. However, some international pole dance stars perform quite sexually explicit routines. 'I've seen Zoraya Judd perform with a python' (Zen Arts, 2012), I relayed to Tiziana, 'that was quite provocative, wasn't it?!' Straightening her spine, she replied:

Well, it depends on which part of the world you come from. In Europe, everyone's very modest; but on the other side of the Ocean, Australia and America, it's an established sport so they can express themselves freely.⁸ Last Saturday, I was in Milan for a workshop with one of the most famous pole dancers in the world, Australian. She represents my idea of pole dance: whether in bare feet or with high-heeled shoes, but always performs with elegance and sensuality. It's never vulgar. There's never any vulgarity.

Tiziana's emphasis on 'vulgarity' was a clear reaction to the perceived danger of stigmatization evoked by Zoraya Judd's performance. In fact, for a woman selling, teaching and performing a dance associated to promiscuous women, losing respectability is an imminent danger. This risk is further exacerbated by the elusiveness of aesthetics-based distinctions between pole and lap dance. Balance and grip on the pole are indeed achieved and maintained through friction between its steel surface and performers' bare skin, and pole dance teachers recommend maximising skin surface accordingly. The variety of dance

⁸ Many of the women I interviewed described Italy as a bigotted and constraining country vis-à-vis other Western countries – notably the US, UK, and Australia – which they considered as more liberal and with more relaxed sexual mores. In Chapter 4 I discuss sexuality and racialised temporality.

styles notwithstanding, pole dancers' harmonious and graceful body movements, strong but feminine bodies,⁹ and revealing costumes coupled with the pole's phallic symbolism, all contribute to generating an atmosphere reminiscent of those spaces, such as a strip clubs, from which pole dancers seek to dis-identify. As Tiziana could not point to any easily identifiable signs of her gendered and class-based distinction (i.e. respectability), she negotiated her display of sexiness in public through a taste-based distinction – i.e. claiming elegance and glamour versus vulgarity and cheapness.

Holland and Attwood observed that glamour was a key factor driving UK pole dance students to choose this practice as a fitness routine, notably in light of its 'high media profile and its association with female celebrities' (2009: 173). However, several pole dance teachers I interviewed lamented instead the undue overlapping of pole dance and celebrity performances, which lack acrobatics and emphasise raunchy femininity. 'For example, take Shakira's video of *Rabiosa*' (Shakira, 2010), Heather told me. Visibly bothered, she continued:

There's an X-pole – which are the poles that we use: the tough ones, not the toy-poles! – and all that she does is a back hook, ok? But that's an easy exercise that even a stripper can perform! Obviously this exacerbates people's doubts about what pole dance really is. Or, take Kate Moss in the White Stripes' video [(White Stripes 2003)]: again, she does a back hook and they call it pole dancing. I mean, I don't say it's not, but if you take the stereotypical look, a model, and you have her doing a very banal exercise...well, whoever sees that will think that 'well, ok, I see that in night clubs too, hence pole is lap [dance]'.

Ulrich also complained about the media's systematic conflation between the two practices. Commenting on a famous Italian actress's pole dance performance on a late evening television show (Gerini, 2013), which contained no acrobatic component, she stated: 'It's shameful how journalists continue to confuse lap with pole dance. Lap dance is performed topless, it entails nudity.' 'But sometimes the difference can be difficult to discern for an outsider, don't you think?' I asked, mindful of how the celebrity in question wore an elegant one-piece dress that she never hinted at removing. 'Well ok, when we're on stage we're not that dressed, wearing culottes and bra only...I know, it doesn't help',

⁹ In Chapter 2, I discussed the gender binary and the muscular body.

she conceded, 'but you can only hold on to the pole with your bare skin. I don't think it would be better if we wore latex!' Ulrich giggled at the thought, perhaps associating a costume of this material with the stereotyped imagery of BDSM¹⁰ mistresses recently glamourised through the commercial success of *50 Shades of Grey* (see for example: Deller & Smith 2013; Martin 2013).

The contradiction between the sexier femininity cultivated in pole dance schools and Heather and Ulrich's chastity statements is consistent with this practice's marketing strategy in Italy, which emphasises its domestic orientation.¹¹ However cyclically, taming and/or denying sexiness by claiming the position of the respectable feminine subject enables pole dancers the possibility to perform it.

As shown in the ethnographic vignette involving Daniela at the start of this chapter, part of such respectability claims entail stressing the class-based distinction between consumers and workers, pole dancers and lap dancers. Indeed, the high cost of pole dancing for pleasure restricts the number of women who can afford the practice. In September 2012, I enrolled in a beginners' pole dance course and was immediately struck by its very high price – a phenomenon similarly observed by scholars researching the UK and Australian contexts (Holland, 2010: 114; see also Owen, 2012: 80).¹² The intensifying market competition notwithstanding, prices continued to increase; a year later, the cost of a monthly pole dance school membership was approximately twice that of the city's top corporate gym (Bologna Pole Dance School, 2013; Virgin Active, 2014).

Speaking for the UK context, Whitehead and Kurz observed that 'the "paid" vs. "paying" dichotomy positions women who pole dance for fun as empowered through choice and control of intent' (2009: 236), as opposed to 'sexually objectified' women (*ibid.*: 233). Their analysis fits within broader feminist

¹⁰ The acronym groups a combination of erotic practices and role playing involving consensual Bondage, Dominance and Submission, Masochism.

¹¹ As discussed in Chapter 2.

¹² The price of one hour-long group class – from warm-up to stretching – was twenty Euros; a package of four classes cost seventy Euros i.e. more than a monthly membership at any mid-range gym granting daily access to a wide range of fitness courses and facilities.

critiques of postfeminism, posited as the outcome of the 'disturbing convergence' between second wave Western feminism's goals and the contemporary demands of capitalism (Fraser, 2009: 97-98). Angela McRobbie argued that 'empowerment' and 'choice' have been re-signified as individual objectives to be pursued through consumerism (2009: 27). Gill and Donaghue suggested that underneath the contemporary 'turn to agency within feminism', there is also a tendency to frame individual choices as personal preferences, thereby overlooking 'the political' – i.e. the weight of social constraints and coercion (2013: 240).

Framed within the binary juxtaposing women's sexual objectification and empowerment, these authors' analyses aptly underline how empowerment is reconfigured as an individual goal – as opposed a collective one – and associated with individual consumption and lifestyle. I argue, however, that pole dance's exceptionally high price intends to not only convey its practitioners' individual empowerment through consumption, but also produce their gendered and class-based distinction through glamour. In fact, glamour affectively seduces women into consumption, as it promises not to jeopardise their respectability, and contributes to making pole dancing accessible to middle-class women.

The issue of accessibility did not emerge much in my interviews with pole dance entrepreneurs and performers. It was, however, strongly raised by Nicola, who practices pole dance in a popular gym in a marginalised, working-class neighbourhood. 'If I had to pay ninety Euros a month to pole dance in a downtown gym among people dressed like in a fashion show, well I wouldn't', he said. Criticising the class connotations of this niche market, he continued:

One of the few political certainties I still hold on to is 'do it yourself' [DIY]; in other words, to show that while other people pay a lot of money for something – like twenty Euros an hour – you can do it for free because you want it and you can figure it out. I think that's quite a moral slap. It's a good example of a possible alternative, especially for us living in this neighbourhood.

Nicola is a leftist sympathiser from a working-class background and neighbourhood, and he speaks of the practice of pole dancing also through (in this case, against) the markers of middle-class-ness. In particular, he reframes

the practice as part of the wider struggle to democratise access to pleasure through consumption (Appadurai 1996: 82-83).

When I started to interview lap dancers, however, I realized that such paying/paid dichotomy used to signify pole dancers' distinction from lap dancers held only partially true.

For some women, pole dancing classes were indeed too expensive: in a five-hour night shift, lap dancers receive an average wage¹³ equivalent to the price of a four hours' pole dance package. For example, one night at Sexy Moon I observed a woman dancing on the pole quite acrobatically; she also performed the Hello Boys trick.¹⁴ 'Where did you learn to do that?' I asked Flavia as she left the dance floor, 'are you taking pole dance classes?' She looked at me with eyes wide open and shrugged, 'Oh no! It's too expensive! I learn at work. I watch videos on YouTube and then I try them on my own.' With that, Flavia left for the bar, as a male customer was waving at her for service.

Others, invested on learning pole dancing to boost their earnings at work. 'I go twice a week and pay one hundred Euros a month', said Demi, a Russian lap dancer working at the Spice & Roll night club. 'Pole dancing in Italy is more expensive than elsewhere', she continued, 'but it's good for my job', probably because it can prompt customers' demand for private (lap) dances.

Others more, possibly practiced it for pleasure too. One night at Danny's – a famous lap dancing club – the manager, to whom I disclosed my researcher identity, invited me to follow him to the lap dancing area. 'Come', he said hooking my arm, 'I'll show you one of my girls who is very good at pole dancing'. We arrived to a line of poles around which lap dancers were strutting quite lazily, and the manager went and whispered something to one of them. She then

¹³ In Italy, lap dancers receive a flat fee for their physical presence in the club, a minimum number of dance breaks in public involving nudity, and a welcoming attitude towards male patrons; and women I interviewed reported that it was approximately 80 Euros a night. Additionally, they can earn commissions on drinks they propel customers to consume and offer them, and on private (lap) dances performed on these latter's request.

¹⁴ I described this trick in Chapter 2.

performed a few acrobatic tricks just to get me to leave, so that she could return to her less labour-intensive dance routine as soon as the manager left.

Moreover, at times pole dance entrepreneurs and teachers used lap dancers' status as exceptional consumers as a marker of their gendered abjection. 'Are there women in your school who are learning pole dance for work?' I asked Francesca during our interview. 'No', she said suddenly clouding over, 'I had several experiences and none of them ended well'. 'Why? What happened?' I insisted, wanting to understand the source of this alleged incompatibility. 'Let's put it this way', she said, and looking me straight in the eye continued:

They have little respect. So, for example, at the last moment they don't show up. They are well-off so, for example, they immediately buy the package, because they think that money can buy pole dancing skills...But it's not like that, it's not that if you pay me more you become better at it, but they interpret...they give this value to money, they have a view of a person slightly...consumerist, I don't know how to explain, but they have little respect for my profession, so I never liked teaching them...it's surely due to the job they do.

Rather than a sign of empowerment through choice and consumerism, Francesca identifies lap dancers' open-handedness as a sign of their immorality, which she relates to their familiarity with the commodification of human relationships. Their 'dirty' money,¹⁵ it is implicitly suggested, will never make them respectable, or glamorous subjects.

In the next section, I delve deeper into this emerging, ethnographically particular austerity associated with pole dancers' respectability claims in Italy vis-à-vis other Western countries, where this practice is more associated with fun, pleasure, sexiness and irony (Holland & Attwood, 2009). In particular, I will foreground the body as a key site for claiming women's gendered and class-based distinction (Bourdieu 1984) i.e. their respectability.

¹⁵ Anne McClintock discussed the meanings of 'dirt' in Victorianism and argued that middle classes' 'obsession with dirt marked a dialectic: the fetishized undervaluation of human Labor' i.e. labour done by 'working class, women and the colonized' on which the 'production of industrial and imperial wealth' relied (1995: 154). Throughout the nineteenth century 'the iconography of dirt became a poetics of surveillance, deployed increasingly to police the boundaries between "normal" sexuality and "dirty" sexuality, "normal" work and "dirty" work and "normal" money and "dirty" money' (*ibid.*). As I will show in Chapter 4, lap dancers and night club employees I interviewed use the dirt/clean dichotomy to signify the sale of sex acts within a night club premises.

Managing dis/respectability through sacrifice: stigmata versus stigma

'When I started pole dancing professionally, for my family to understand it was...' Tiziana disconsolately shook her head, '...I'm still struggling'. Sitting in the doorway of her pole dance school, Tiziana's mother had just unexpectedly joined us a few minutes earlier – or at least I thought it was unexpected.¹⁶ Looking into her mother's eyes, Tiziana continued:

Even my mother, she's my biggest supporter now, but the first time she saw me in a video she screamed 'Noooo! What are you doing?!' But then she started following me, coming here to the school, and she began to say 'Oh my God, how much work out! How many sacrifices! What bruises you have!' She saw that I have corns, that I have a pain here and there, up and down....so she realised that I don't go a bruciata.

Her mother smiled and nodded in agreement with her daughter's tale, but I did not understand Tiziana's last words; I could not grasp the comparison she was making. 'What does "going to bruciata" mean?' I asked her, knowing this word only as the feminine past principle of burnt. 'Bruciata is a famous place, a street, actually an area, where streetwalkers stand by a bright pole under streetlights', Tiziana explained hurriedly, as if my question evoked thoughts she wanted to disavow. Until recently, the term bruciata was used to mark women who had (vaginal) sex before marriage (Harrison, 1966: 160); an act which was both a sin for the Catholic Church and a loss of capital value on the bourgeois marriage market. It also literally describes the end fate of women executed for witchcraft during the Catholic Inquisition.¹⁷ The use of this term to indicate an area where streetwalkers publicly negotiate the sale of sex acts conveys the gendered, class-based and religiously inflected roots of the stigma from which Tiziana sought to dis-identify.

'But the rest of the family does not understand it' she said, returning to the topic of her relatives' stubborn refusal to accept her new job. 'I invited them several times to watch me perform, but they never came. They prefer to put their head

¹⁶ As Tiziana's subsequent quote portends, her mother frequently assisted to her daughter's pole dance classes.

¹⁷ I highlighted the link between Inquisition, witchcraft and women's sexuality in Chapter 2.

in the sand rather than face reality'. For Tiziana, accepting reality meant acknowledging that she earned her living by selling, teaching and however occasionally performing for money a dance associated with women stigmatised by a multi-layered respectability code. Part of the resistance Tiziana faced was certainly derived from her school's ice-breaking marketing of pole dance in a pristine market, notably in a small town where women's display of sexuality in public were incompatible with their respectability. Another part, however, derived from her status as a divorced woman in a Catholic family and community. Divorce in Italy was legalised in 1970 i.e. a few years before Tiziana's birth,¹⁸ but theology-wise it remains an indissoluble sacrament (Müller 2013). Hence, Tiziana's divorced status signals a break of marital chastity, and her pole dancing job possibly exacerbates the risk she perceives of being stigmatized as a whore.

According to Pierre Bourdieu, the body is 'the most indisputable materialization of class taste' (1984: 190), and in fact, Tiziana claimed her respectability by transforming her work-born body bruises into a stigmata signalling her distinction from her feminine abject, i.e. the whore. Similarly, Loïc Wacquant observed that physical pain and hazard play an important role in male boxers' prideful presentation as '*self-made men* in the literal sense that they produce themselves through daily bodily work in the gym and out' (2001: 188-189).

As I briefly practiced pole dancing, I know the pain of balancing on the pole by squeezing my bare inner thighs around it, and by climbing the pole by leveraging the back of my feet. Day-after tales of body aches among pole dance practitioners can contribute to maintaining stamina, building relationships through self-irony, or even glamorising physical pain itself. As highlighted by Tiziana's words, however, bruises are also a currency circulating in a moral economy of distinction premised on the othering of lap dancers, and more broadly sex workers.

¹⁸ Catholic political and religious forces subsequently tried to overturn it; for example in 1974, the ruling Christian Democratic Party organised a referendum to repeal this law, which failed (Pollard, 2008: 150).

Similar to Tiziana, Heather also used bruises as proof of her embodied respectability. With long, wavy hair falling over a flowery tunic, no make-up and huge brass earrings, Heather's aesthetics evoked the flower-power fashion of the 1960s-70s, when the civil rights, anti-war and sexual liberation movements swept across most Western countries. A pole dance teacher in her early twenties, she hails from a working class family.¹⁹ When, a few years ago, she had to decide where to pursue higher education, her parents opposed her aspiration to study humanities in the UK on the grounds that such a degree would show no return on investment. 'If you want to study in the UK, you have to choose economics', her father reportedly told her, eventually agreeing to a middle ground deal – i.e. yes to humanities, but in Italy. 'How did you start practicing pole dance?' I asked Heather well into the interview. As if anticipating a moral questioning, she straightened her spine and recounted how it was her mother's idea.²⁰ 'More or less on the 27th of November, my mother called me and said "Darling"', she mimicked her mother sipping a cup of tea, "'I've just seen on TV a sport that looks like it's been made for you. Something like pole dance, pule dance, I don't know, but I think you'd love it.'"

'Wow! Your mother's really open-minded', I exclaimed, 'Mine wouldn't distinguish pole from lap dancing'. 'Neither mine! What do you mean?' she retorted unexpectedly, as if I was questioning her mother's morality. It turned out that it was Heather who first mentioned seeing 'a sporty lap dance on TV that was super cool' during a family trip. Remembering Heather's excitement, her mother proposed it as a cure for depression, as Heather had been feeling quite lonely in her new city. 'Anyway, now she speaks with pride about the sport I'm doing, but she uses the worst terms'. Heather relayed how she had scolded her mother for calling pole dance 'a sporty lap dance' in front of her friends: 'I told her: "Mum, you shouldn't even compare them. There's a pole in both, but

¹⁹ Her parents lived and worked in Germany before settling back in Italy, from where they both hailed, and their migration trajectory attests their humble origins. When the fascist regime collapsed, the ban on migration it had imposed also fell; in the aftermath of WWII many Italians especially from the job-poorer southern regions migrated to Germany, France, Swiss (see for example: Colombo & Sciortino 2004; Mingione & Quassoli 2000).

²⁰ In Chapter 5 I show how analogously Fiona, a Romanian lap dancer, contradictorily mobilizes the figure of her mother to claim her chastity and then to justify her choice to sell her erotic capital.

this does not mean that it's the same sport, ok?" Similarly to Tiziana, upholding an aesthetics-based distinction was however elusive. 'So what is the difference exactly?' I asked Heather. 'Lap is dancing with this', she said as she pointed to her pelvis and gyrated. 'Like belly dancing?'²¹ I asked, unconvinced by her explanation.

No. Lap dance creates a magnetic field from the dancer's belly-uterus zone towards another person, and you use the pole [...]. Then there is the stripping, though stripping is not necessary. Whereas pole dance is dancing with the pole: it is no longer an object that you use but it is what enables you to do [acrobatic tricks], understand? In fact, one could lap dance even without the pole, or using it only slightly – such as holding it with your hands and rubbing against it – and then spending the rest of the time on the floor²² or on someone's lap. Such things are unheard of among ourselves [pole dancers]. And anyway, no lap dancer will ever have our bruises, understand?

The attributes that Heather uses to distinguish pole dancers from lap dancers – i.e. idleness, promiscuity, opportunism – evoke the gendered and class-based discourse that produces the respectability of the middle class through the othering of the working class (men and women) and women prostitutes. Such distinction is, firstly, signalled by lap and pole dancers' different affective relations with the pole: the former use it lazily, opportunistically and promiscuously to entice male customers; while the latter engages with it deferentially, acknowledging their dependence on it/him. Ultimately, however, Heather points to the bruises and sacrifices to seal the distinction.

I have argued thus far that pole dancers claim the position of the respectable feminine subject to negotiate their display of sexuality in public, attempting to disavow the gendered stigmas marking their feminine abject – i.e. lap dancers,

²¹ The consumption of 'Oriental dance' or 'belly dance' in Western countries followed a trajectory similar to pole dancing. It was prompted by a typically Western fascination with the 'exotic' Orient, as it was first introduced in the US during the 1893 Chicago International Exhibition by a Syrian dancer performing under the stage name 'Little Egypt' (Wynn, 2007: 215; see also Egan, 2006: 7). Throughout the twentieth century, belly dance became alternatively associated with 'spirituality, sensuality, femininity, and exercise' (Hanna, 2010: 220). Lately, however, its popularity has decreased dramatically. 'I used to have so many students....This year I have only twenty-five' explained Lola, an Italian Oriental dance teacher and performer in her early thirties, 'what sells now is Zumba, Burlesque, Pole Dance'.

²² She means time spent off the pole, strutting around it or doing any other choreographic dance move that is grouped as part of floor work in pole dance.

as metonyms of the figure of the whore. Their respectability claims foreground a blend of pleasure and sacrifice, glamorous and bruised bodies.

In the next section, I shift my focus to the women who have been historically abjectified by respectability, i.e. prostitutes/sex workers. I engage with the feminist sex wars debate on prostitution/sex work, discussing women's agency in a context characterised by the increasing contradictions between late capitalist consumerist-driven growth and economic precarity, which limits individuals' capacities to fulfil consumption's promise of pleasure (Appadurai 1996: 82-83). In this way, I prepare the ground for the ensuing discussion of young women's ambivalent subjectification in contemporary striptease culture amidst glamour and stigma.

Agency, sex (work) and the market

'When we started to speak out, we were in the aftermath of the battle to obtain [the right to] divorce, abortion; all the big struggles for women's self-determination', recounted Pia Covre, a former street sex worker and co-founder of Comitato.

For us, it was clear that our sexuality was ours and we could use it as we wished: for love within the family and to make sacrifices if necessary, but also to obtain benefits – something that anyway wasn't so different from marital relations because, back then, many women married to improve their social and economic status. [...] For years we argued that whatever a woman did with her body was a personal, private decision, regardless of whether she wanted to have sex for money, gifts or for free. I thought this was very feminist as a concept of self-determination, but instead we immediately clashed with feminists supporting the old concept that exchanging sex for money reinforced the patriarchy and was a form of violence against women. Even today, abolitionists repeat this.

Second wave Western feminists' struggle for women's liberation during the 1960s-70s in most Western countries, Italy included, forms the background of Pia's words (Willson, 2011: 269). 'The personal is political' was one of the most powerful feminist slogans coined during that period. It conveyed the struggle to both politicise the unequal power relations between men and women, which was shielded behind the private and sacred walls of the home, and reclaim

women's control over their bodies, especially in matters of reproduction and sexuality. As Pia highlighted, however, the goals for which a woman could legitimately use her own sexuality became a highly political issue, which formed the basis of the ensuing feminist sex wars, where

practices of prostitution serve[d] as a central trope. The prostitute thus comes to function as both the most literal of sexual slaves and as the most subversive of sexual agents within a sexist social order. (Chapkis, 1997: 12)

For radical feminists and abolitionists,²³ prostitution is the 'cornerstone' of 'institutionalized sex inequality' between women and men (MacKinnon, 2011: 273). Their position is grounded in the work of feminist political theorist Carole Pateman, who argued that the social contract enabling humankind's shift from the state of nature to civil society was a 'sexual contract'; a contract that institutionalised women's subordination to men via marriage and prostitution (1988). According to Pateman, being a man in 'modern patriarchy' entails disposing of women either through marriage or prostitution – the difference between these two employment contracts being that men appropriate women's domestic and sexual labour in marriage (Pateman, 1988: 115), while in prostitution they pay for the latter only i.e. for 'the unilateral use of a women's body' (*ibid.*: 198). Yet, it is only upon a woman's entry into prostitution that her subjectivity and agency is questioned. For Catharine MacKinnon, Professor of Law and renowned radical feminist activist, prostitution can only be 'a product of lack of choice, the resort of those with the fewest choices, or none at all' (2011: 274). Radical feminists use the term 'prostituted' to signal that human beings selling sex are no more so, as they have become objects upon whom other people's will and social forces' coercion are exercised (*ibid.*: 273).²⁴

²³ 'Abolitionism' is the approach adopted by (some) feminists and socialists in response to what they consider a degrading act – i.e. the sale of sex; it is at the core of the 1949 UN Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others, and it underlies the Swedish mode' (see Chapter 1). Although espoused in a more contradictory manner, abolitionism is also the approach of the Italian legislation on prostitution (Garofalo Geymonat, 2014: 37), which I discuss in Chapter 4.

²⁴ Such assumption feeds into the 'objectification stigma' I introduced in Chapter 1. Here, objectification both entails and confirms 'prostituted' women's victimhood status, as 'sexual abuse in childhood prior to entry into prostitution is a major precondition' (*ibid.*: 279). Victimhood is stressed by further linking prostitution to rape and physical violence perpetrated by pimps and customers (*ibid.*: 282), as well as drug and alcohol addiction (*ibid.*: 287).

On the opposite end, sex radical feminists reclaimed the whore as the most powerful symbol of political subversion. The whore, they argue, is cognisant of the value of her time and sexuality, and autonomously disposes of both, whereas 'domesticated women don't dare put a price on their time' (Pat Califia quot. in Chapkis, 1997: 30). For sex libertarians, women in prostitution '*rule*; they are in total control', and men's use of money is 'a confession of weakness [because] they have to buy women's attention' (Camille Paglia quot. in Chapkis, 1997: 22). From amidst these two polarised positions arose a third, which asks for the recognition of prostitution as a form of 'sex work' – a term preferred for its less stigmatised connotation (Koken, 2010: 31). Sex worker activists and their allies demand full recognition of sex workers' labour and human rights, acknowledging that – coercive structures and power relations notwithstanding – sex workers are 'agents with some ability to negotiate within the sex industry' (Kotiswaran, 2011: 10).

'I understand that some feminists accept that women living in extreme poverty can resort to sell sex if no options for a "respectable" job are available', I said to Pia. 'What is a respectable job?' Pia lashed back at me. Implying that it was not my personal opinion, I said: 'I suppose a job in which you don't sell sex.' I was cognizant of the fact that, however socially and economically undervalued, care and domestic work have historically been, and are still, considered more 'respectable' jobs than sex work for working class and migrant women (see for example: Agustín, 2007: 53, 126; Skeggs, 1997: 41; Andrijasevic, 2010: 74).²⁵ 'I don't understand why using my sexuality for an objective that I consider fair or appropriate is not respectable', she replied.

They have a strange idea of respectability. That's one thing that truly makes me mad: why, in all this time, did they not strive to remove the obstacles that prevent us all from having respectable working conditions then? Either they give respectable and well-paid jobs to us all, or else, if I want to live at a certain standard and have access to the range of consumer goods that they continuously push in their society, they have to put me in the condition of obtaining them through what they consider respectable. And if they can't, then

²⁵ In Chapters 4 and 5, I discuss migrant women's prevalent employment in Italy, and more broadly in Western European countries, as erotic, sex or care workers.

they ought to put me in the condition of doing my work respectably; and this is it, eventually.

Pia pointed the finger at late capitalism's structural contradiction between consumerist-fuelled growth and the lack of decent jobs; people are the growth producers but are unable to partake in its fruits. In fact, in 'a world characterized by weak [economic] growth and high return on capital', where income gaps are widening and the concentration of assets is worsening, long-term inequality in the distribution of wealth is rising (Piketty, 2014: 46). On the other hand, within 'extensively monetized economies [...] variation in human welfare depends heavily on differences between high wages, low wages, and no wages; between generous and stingy public benefits; between extensive, meagre, and no inherited wealth' (Zelizer 2005: 39).

Within a context characterised by deepening inequalities within and across nations, Pia pinpointed abolitionists' inconsistency: on the one hand, they blame 'prostituted' women's lack of choice on overarching structural inequalities; and on the other hand, they approach such inequalities through a 'personal-morality framework' (Price-Glynn, 2010: 162), which entails the criminalisation of customers (i.e. the Swedish model) and sex workers' professional reorientation to more 'respectable' jobs.

At the same time, such more respectable jobs are often not only poorly paid, but at times also physically hazardous. For example, Kyla, an Italian indoor sex worker in her late forties, started autonomously selling sex more than ten years ago, when she realised that in two hours' (sex) work she earned more than in a month spent, as she recounted, 'breathing acids' in a luxury car factory. 'And fuck, I mean, wasn't I risking my life?' she said. Embittered at her family's reaction when they first discovered her move to sex work, Kyla continued: 'And in any case, it's me, it's my body; I don't harm anyone'. Similarly, Pia recounted that she had decided to sell sex mostly because of this job's cost-effectiveness, which enabled her to enjoy a pleasurable life outside of work as well as the fruits of her labour:

Before, I worked as a hairdresser, in restaurants, in bars; I'm a good waitress too. I didn't mind, these jobs were ok, but they paid too little for too many hours' work. This was my problem. [...] One day, I calculated how much I had earned, how many hours it had taken me, and how much was left for me to enjoy life – do things I like, buy music or dresses or to go to the theatre, to the cinema. So I thought something was wrong: I was spending every hour working and, when I had a day off, I had no money to enjoy myself, go to the theatre, on holiday. I mean, simple things. Then, meanwhile, there were customers coming to the restaurant and inviting me out; when I did, just because they offered me a dinner out, they expected me to have sex with them. I did not like it and I thought it wasn't fair.²⁶ But when I was offered money, I thought: 'well, why not? If I can have him pay me like a month's salary...' So, I did my accounts and saw they were much better, because I could earn a month's salary by going on the street only once a week. Why would I work the whole month? So I balanced myself on my needs. I decided it; I chose it as an occupation. I did it freely, alone, independent, and I decided what I wanted to earn, how much time I wanted to spend working and how much time off. I decided what I needed to live.

Neither Kyla nor Pia are claiming sex work as empowering per se, but as something that offers enough money and free time to spend cultivating their interests or supporting their loved ones. Similarly, as I discuss in the next sections and Chapter 5, many young Italian and migrant women resort to erotic and sex work in order to pursue their personal aspirations of social and/or spatial mobility and feed their affective ties. Yet, in so doing, they take up a subject position that is stigmatised for its dis-respectable use and display of sexuality. In the next section, I discuss how women navigate the hierarchies of social and economic value reproduced through the normalisation, glamorisation or stigmatisation of different brackets of the erotic and sex markets.

Dancing sexily for money or glamour?

Thirty years after the outburst of the feminist sex wars, sex markets are increasingly diversified and fast-changing, and scholars have observed that some trades are becoming more respectable. In particular, Elisabeth Bernstein

²⁶ In several Western countries, the 1960s 'revolution [...] in heterosexuality' (Berlant, 1997) was crucially enabled by the availability of the contraceptive pill and the legalisation of abortion; in Italy, however, most of these changes occurred only in the 1970s (divorce was legalised in 1970, contraception in 1971, and abortion in 1978). Meanwhile, as I will discuss in Chapter 4, state regulated brothels were shut down at the end of 1958, thereby creating a peak in male demand for recreational sex. However as Pia's words suggest, this transformation was not paralleled by a change in how men considered women wishing to enjoy their sexuality as freely (i.e. they remained whores).

argued that the contemporary sexualisation of culture is contributing to turning sex work into a respectable, middle-class occupation (2007a) through a shift from 'the old morality of duty, based on the opposition between pleasure and good,' to a 'morality of pleasure as a duty' (Bourdieu, 1984: 367).

In contrast to the old petit-bourgeois values of upwardly mobile asceticism and restraint (which served to distinguish this class from the working class, whose ethos rejects 'pretence' and striving), the new petite bourgeoisie regards fun, pleasure, and freedom as ethical ideals worthy of strenuous pursuit. (Bernstein, 2007a: 477)

The consumption and sale of sex complies with such an ethic of 'fun, pleasure, and freedom' (Bernstein, 2007a: 477). In parallel, however, she observed that stigma and repression of other sex market niches is increasing, especially for street-based sex work (Bernstein, 2007b: 4; see also: Brents & Hausbeck, 2010: 15). At the crossroads of the sexualisation of culture and the mainstreaming of the sex industry (Brents & Hausbeck, 2010: 9), the borders between dancing erotically for pleasure (and pleasure) and for work are increasingly blurred. Meanwhile, however, the stigma on women who strip for a living persists (Price-Glynn, 2010: 35; see also: Holland & Attwood, 2009: 174), as exemplified by Zeza's story at the opening of this chapter.

Eleonora is a pole dance teacher in her mid-thirties. Coming from a bourgeois family, she left her parents' home when she began university, 'and I've been totally independent ever since'. While her proud statement of economic self-reliance might sound redundant in most European countries north and west of the Alps, most young people in Italy continue living with their parents until they get married (Saraceno 2004: 50) – a condition of dependence that is being exacerbated by worsening economic conditions. 'At first, I did the typical, poorly paid student jobs', she said,

but they paid me too late and rent has got to be paid on time! So eventually, I thought I should find something else [...] and I found a "sexy restaurant". They

served food and had strip shows, and needed some Italian-speaking girls. It was a bit adrift as a venue...²⁷

While working as a sexy waitress, Eleonora watched erotic performances and started practicing on her own, eventually putting on an acrobatic strip show that she proposed and eventually sold to night clubs across Italy. 'I used to earn one hundred and fifty Euros per night plus hotel and drink fees', she recalled, 'and every time I moved to another city, I'd negotiate at least four nights.' Roughly, in one week's work Eleonora could earn the equivalent of a shop keeper's monthly salary.

Eleonora's choice of resorting to erotic work in order to pay for her education and living expenses is not exceptional. Existing ethnographic and sociological literature on women lap dancers is, indeed, mainly produced by scholars who worked in UK, US or Canadian strip clubs while pursuing higher education (see for example: Colosi, 2012; Law, 2012; Brooks, 2010; Price-Glynn 2010; Egan 2006). At the same time, none of these works specifically discuss the structural relationship between the high cost of higher education and students' engagement in erotic/sex work. Between sensationalism and voyeurism, the topic recurrently emerges in media and some cultural productions.²⁸ As the UK government increased university fees and cut various forms of economic support for students, engagement in erotic and sex work was framed as a social phenomenon (Turner & Phillips, 2011) and academics began exploring the relationship between higher education and the sex industry. Sanders and Hardy found that the UK striptease industry was powered by students and migrants (Sanders & Hardy, 2013: 16). Economic and practical considerations (e.g. cost-effectiveness, flexibility) figured among the top reasons students gave for taking up different forms of erotic and sex work; in addition, all researches have highlighted the influence of an 'increased "respectability" in how people view sexual services as leisure and also work' (Sanders & Hardy, 2014: 14; see also Roberts et al., 2013: 350). In line with these findings, the *Student Sex Work*

²⁷ Eleonora is associating Italianness to a higher quality of service, and hence to customers' consumption capacity and class positioning. In Chapter 4 I discuss the racialised inflections of respectability.

²⁸ See for example: *The intimate adventures of a London call girl* (Jour, 2005); and the more recent movies *Elles* (Szumowska, 2011) and *Jeune & Jolie* (Ozon, 2013).

Project highlighted that, practical considerations aside, many students ‘reported an intrinsic interest for working in the sex industry (with expectations of enjoyment and sexual pleasure)’ (Sagar et al., 2015: 22; see also: Sanders & Hardy, 2013: 16).

There is a dearth of such studies on Italy; however, my fieldwork findings point to the existence of a relationship between pursuing higher education, increased cost of living and students’ engagement in erotic/sex work. ‘Are there any undergraduate students working as lap dancers here?’ I asked Gianna, the Human Resource Manager at the Spice & Roll, a renowned night club. ‘Sure, there have been many’, she replied proudly,

one of them graduated recently, she just came here to thank me in person. Her parents covered the first term fees only and told her to manage herself afterwards, so she managed to support herself throughout these years just by working here.

Demi, a Russian woman in her early thirties, is currently studying for her MA in Political Economy and working at the Spice & Roll:

I began working as lap dancer when I went back studying.²⁹ I needed money to study and to live. Rent is very high and so is the cost of living. If I worked as a hostess or a translator in trade fairs, I would earn a thousand Euros a month; and you can’t do anything with that money now.

‘Well, sure, if you have to pay rent...’ I said, noting that the cost of young people’s education in Italy is often cushioned by continuing to live with their families – an experience I shared. ‘No, even if I didn’t have to pay rent it would be impossible. This year they’ve raised university fees twice already’, she stated firmly. ‘But how do you combine night work and daytime studies?’ I queried, mindful of how psychologically and physically draining my experience in higher education has been. ‘But I don’t always do this job. I work every other month so I can study. If I had a normal job I wouldn’t make it’, she said, highlighting how flexibility and cost-effectiveness was crucial to her choice to work as a lap dancer.

²⁹ As I show in Chapter 5, she had already worked in erotic/sex work before settling in Italy where she eventually matured the decision to go back studying.

‘Who are your colleagues there, on average?’ I asked Roberta, an Italian woman in her early twenties who works frequently as a temporary sex worker in Swiss brothels, where sex work is legal. ‘Many come from Eastern European countries,³⁰ but in the past two years the number of Italians has been increasing’, she said thoughtfully, ‘I think it’s due to the [economic] crisis. At least three from my faculty started working as lap dancers and escorts’.

Whereas these findings confirm that financial matters are a key motivation for students’ engagement in erotic and sex work, cost-effectiveness alone does not tell the whole story. ‘How did you feel the first time you stripped?’ I asked Eleonora.

Well, you know what, I thought I would be excited but I wasn’t. Because anyway, you create the show and it feels like a carnival play. It’s a bit of a laugh because you think, ‘what are you [customers] here for? Is this what you need?’ (h) But yeah, eventually they did, and thank God, because I could pay for ten years’ studies at university!

Eleonora’s framing of erotic work as a fun job is consistent with the increasing normalisation of commodified sex partly reflected in, and reproduced through, striptease culture. It further shows the limitations of feminist debates juxtaposing women’s objectification to their empowerment, oppression and liberation, which I discussed in Chapter 2. In fact, in taking up a job that was arguably not her first choice, Eleonora could pursue a pathway promising to fulfil her personal aspirations in the near future. At the same time, stripping for money continues to remain a stigmatised activity; indeed, the *Student Sex Work Project* found that stigma and concealment of one’s engagement in erotic and sex work was students’ biggest challenge (Sagar et al., 2015: 26; see also Sanders & Hardy, 2014: 13).³¹

The ambivalent aura of glamour and stigma surrounding stripping in contemporary striptease culture emerged clearly in Kate’s interview. A Ukrainian woman in her early twenties, Kate migrated to Italy ten years ago,

³⁰ In Chapter 4 I discuss whiteness and male customers’ racialised desire.

³¹ As shown in Chapter 2, Eleonora also concealed her past engagement in lap dancing not to jeopardize the respectability of her pole dance school.

after her mother managed to formalise her domestic work contract.³² Kate is now a third year student in Economics and covers most of her living expenses and university fees by doing a range of occasional jobs all reliant on her appealing aesthetics: from image girl in discos to hostess in trade fairs. Burdened with preparations for university exams, she kept postponing the date of our interview, which eventually occurred over the summer break. 'Who else are you interviewing for your research? Only us image girls?' she asked after we broke the ice. As it happened, the day before I had interviewed a Burlesquer; when I relayed this to Kate to show the range of interview subjects I was including in my fieldwork, she could not contain her excitement. 'Yes! I do that too! We also do Burlesque!' she exclaimed proudly, but then shifted to a more restrained tone, 'But we spend whole afternoons to set up the show. It's not as easy as people think'. Kate had just started collaborating with 'Glitters and Diamonds', a women-only dance group providing live entertainment in discos. Her emphasis on the hard work involved in preparing a Burlesque show was, at least in part, a way to tame the gendered and class-based stigma surrounding women stripping in public for money, who are labelled as idle (among other things).

'What character do you perform on stage?' I asked Kate to reassure her of my insider knowledge and non-judgemental attitude, 'the diva? The femme fatale...?' Unexpectedly, my question stirred an adverse reaction. 'Ah ok, they are really...Well, no, I mean...' she stuttered, seemingly embarrassed, 'we do more animation kinds of stuff...We're trying with Burlesque because it's very well paid'. 'How much?' I asked. 'Up to one hundred and fifty or even two hundred Euros each for a fifteen to twenty minute show', she replied. That was more than she made in a five-hour night shift as an image girl in discos, and almost three times as much as what she earned in trade fairs 'to stand all day long in high heels, with swollen legs, from nine am to one pm and then from two pm till evening'.³³ 'That's indeed a lot of money! But do you get this much for a show in

³² In Chapter 5 I discuss her mother's migration trajectory and the narrow sex/care work binary she was faced with upon her entry into Italy.

³³ She earned one hundred and thirty Euros for a five-hour night shift as an image girl in discos, and seventy-eighty Euros a day as a trade fair hostess.

discos?’ I asked, a bit surprised by the amount. ‘Oh no, that’s what we ask from casinos’, she explained hurriedly, then continued:

Look, to tell you the truth, I’m not as good in Burlesque as the person you interviewed. We’ve simply assembled [a] Burlesque [show]. Usually, it’s performed by one performer only, but we are setting up a three-song group show. In the beginning, we are dressed like men and then we slowly begin to strip...it’s a super-sexy thing! (h) And we do all this while dancing, doing synchronised choreography, and stripping. (h) It’s very beautiful!

The excitement surfacing in Kate’s tale conveys the pleasure she felt at imagining herself as a ‘subject of glamour’ (Gundle & Trini Castelli, 2006: 8) through mimicking the aesthetics of, and routines performed by, film and TV celebrities. Hence, it shows the influence of striptease culture in transforming a substantially stigmatised activity – i.e. stripping for money – into a glamorous one.

However, Kate’s pleasurable feeling was seemingly built through her relation with other female colleagues, as they played with one another in preparing the show routine, relationally constructing and confirming each other’s sexual desirability. I wondered, however, whether and how this feeling changed when she performed in front of a predominantly male audience, whom she was paid to entertain.³⁴ ‘How did it feel when you performed Burlesque live?’ I asked her. ‘Ah well, I don’t know, I haven’t done it yet’, she said, ‘This is a new thing. We’ll see’. She paused for a while, and I guessed that she was visualising her sexy performance in the casino. ‘But eventually, I don’t give a shit’, she said bitterly. ‘Nobody knows me there. Surely, I would never perform Burlesque here, but in Swiss [casinos] it’s ok. I take my money and run away’, she concluded with embarrassed laughter.

The contrast is striking between Kate’s sparkling attitude toward Burlesquing with her mates and the shame she felt at performing in front of strangers; and it conveys the ambivalences surrounding the act of stripping for glamour or money in contemporary striptease culture.

³⁴ In Chapter 5, I discuss the ambivalence of power and despise, desirability and stigma, emerging from interviews to image girls and lap dancers.

At the same time, these jobs are extremely well-paid compared to the other options available to young people, especially while pursuing higher education. Kate continued:

Now I work once a week only, either Fridays or Saturdays, and I earn one hundred and twenty or one hundred and thirty Euros per night. So, eventually, it is the equivalent of a salary [...] But I tell you, even if it's easier, this is not a job for life. When I'm young, it's ok, I am studying and I manage. Later, it's still to be seen. As soon as I find something better.... I am sending out my CV, I am continuing to look for a job in a company. If I manage to find a decent job, I will stop. Slowly, slowly, I'll begin to stop. I'll do a few nights only...I don't know, but I don't want this in my future. How would I manage having a family and saying to my kids, 'Hey, mummy performs Burlesque.' Come on! It's obvious!

The cost-effectiveness and availability of Kate's different service jobs (vis-à-vis 'decent' jobs), all of which rely on her appealing aesthetics and erotic capital, emerges clearly in the extract above. However, she also envisages these jobs as time-bound, as good enough to help her move from one life stage to another – i.e. from completing her education to being a good wife and mother that no longer performs Burlesque for money.

Similarly, many pole dance teachers I interviewed were women in their early twenties whose earnings helped cover at least part of their living expenses while in higher education. Ulrich, for example, is a fourth year Engineering student. Born in Romania, she moved to Italy a few years ago because she fell in love with a young Italian man; at the time of our interview, they were living together. Unencumbered by rent, as her fiancé's family owned the house they lived in, the money she earned teaching in the local pole dance school covered her living expenses. In addition, she also participated in local and regional pole dance competitions, and sometimes won prizes. 'Is pole dancing more of a job or a pleasure for you?' I asked. 'Oh, money does not matter', she said modestly, 'I mean, it's very convenient, I'm very happy, but even if they asked me to perform for free I'd be just as happy'.

Nonetheless, Ulrich's selflessness is somewhat contradictory: while she prides herself for loving pole dance over and above money – thereby taking distance from her feminine abject – like most pole dance teachers I interviewed, she

performed paid shows in a number of public entertainment venues. However, in getting paid to perform outside the pole dance school's homosocial environment, pole dancers' gendered and class-based distinction from lap dancers fades away, and they experience the gendered stigmas labelling erotic and sex workers. 'So where do you perform? Who hires you?' I asked. Visibly stiffening, she responded:

Unfortunately, most of my performances are in discos, for animation. I do it for the money because it doesn't give me satisfaction. People don't look at you, they don't pay attention, and as soon as they see the pole they think that you are about to do something obscene and undress. In fact, sometimes they get it wrong, because this is not lap dancing; you can't touch me or try to give me money or whatever. Absolutely not!

Evidently, both Ulrich and Kate experienced the contradictions embedded in contemporary striptease culture, as they shifted synchronically from embodying subjects of glamour to the stigmatised position and role of erotic performer.

Similar contradictions emerged in Carla's shift, as she went from feeling proud of her defiance of standards of feminine gracility³⁵ to receiving despise outside the homosocial context of the pole dance school for her failure to comply with normative standards of feminine embodiment. At one point, Carla was rejected from a performance in a high-end disco, and when she queried her manager as to why this had been done, this latter replied, 'You know that I don't care about your body size, you're the strongest pole dancer in my portfolio, but others might do.' 'Unfortunately, they associate us with podium dancers and image girls', she continued, 'They don't understand a fuck. You could do Scorpio, Gemini, Scorpio and Gemini³⁶ one after the other...instead I kill myself and in fact I am covered in bandages.' At these words, Carla turned her back to me and lifted her t-shirt. 'These are bandages my physiotherapist put to hold my muscles tight', she explained as I looked at the thick coloured lines criss-crossing her back like a tribal tattoo. 'I have a cervical hernia and I shouldn't pole dance. Full stop. But...' Inasmuch as her devotion to pole dancing

³⁵ In Chapter 2, I discussed the gender binary and the muscular body.

³⁶ 'Scorpio' (Pole Dance Dictionary) and 'Gemini' (Pole Dance Dictionary) are the names of two acrobatically complex tricks.

superseded her physical pain, evidenced by her injuries, Carla's sacrifices were not valued outside the women-only spaces; instead, scars amounted to the marking of a (hetero)sexually undesirable body.

In the next section, I discuss how the ambivalences embedded in striptease culture were diachronically deflected in Monica's trajectory, as she experienced increasing economic insecurity.

Caught in a contradiction: whose pleasure, whose money?

Monica and I literally took our first steps in pole dancing together,³⁷ and we met frequently at school. In time, we began seeing each other socially; most of our meetings involved sharing romantic love-related news over vegetable soup - as we were both constantly concerned with weight loss.

In her early twenties, Monica lived alone in a rented flat and worked full-time in a public welfare institution. 'Mine was the typical controlling father: until I was eighteen, he did not let me do fucking shit', she said in response to my asking why she did not pursue higher education, 'so I just left home as soon as I could and looked for a job'. After Monica freed herself of her parents' control, she was finally able to release her passion for dancing and her bursting liveliness attracted disco managers' attention. 'You know, I am explosive by nature! If I saw people sitting, I'd go and pull them: "come on boys, let's dance!"' she recounted, explaining how she began working in animation in a disco in exchange for free entry and drinks. 'What kind of work was that?' I asked her. 'I stood on a small stage outside the entrance, and I stopped people passing by [saying], "hey come on in, come on!"' she said jauntily. She then took her phone and scrolled through images to show me pictures of that summer. In one such picture, she was completely wet and wearing a revealingly white t-shirt. 'They have a shower just outside the entrance', she explained, 'so you'd have to go in it while wearing the disco's t-shirt, dance and call men in!' Her pleasurable memories of feeling like a siren, endowed with the power to enchant customers to enter the disco, were suddenly interrupted by a disturbing thought: the fear

³⁷ See the introduction of Chapter 2.

of stigmatisation. 'Hey, we didn't do anything vulgar, got it?!' she scoffed, looking me straight in the eye.

Months passed and, while I gave up pole dancing due to fear of injury, Monica invested more and more time, physical efforts and money into it. She shifted from a weekly membership to the much pricier monthly one, and I saw her struggling with carpal tunnel inflammations in both hands and a cracked rib. Just before the summer break, she said she hoped to convince her parents to buy the three hundred Euro pole for home practice as a Christmas gift, as she could not afford it herself.

We kept in touch, although our contact became more infrequent. One year after our first encounter, we went for a drink in a trendy downtown bar; it was quite a change from our otherwise unassuming routine. 'Guess what?!' she said before we even sat down, 'I enrolled in university! Communication! What else do you think I could study?!' She laughed, hinting at the economic value of her social skills. 'That's great!' I exclaimed, well-aware of the courage it takes to step out of the labour market and return to studying. While I had the same experience of going back to university, I could rely on savings accumulated throughout many years of well-paid work as a development consultant; conversely, Monica's decision was ignited by job precariousness.³⁸ Although brave and satisfied with her decision to invest in professional requalification instead of looking for another precarious, low-skilled, short-term job, finance-wise Monica was worried. 'I'll be on the dole for some months', she said, 'but then what? I don't want to ask my parents for money.' Monica thought the best way for her to cope with the fees and study workload, while maintaining her independence, was to compile a portfolio to send to modelling agencies for image work in trade fairs.

³⁸ When I interviewed Monica, she was still working but knew her job would be ending regardless of her performance:

'I have a fixed-term contract with a public institution. I already had three contract renewals and, according to the Monti Law, there can be no more. To hire me again as a fixed-term employee, they would have to call an open exam for state-level employment, but it's been four years since these exams were blocked. They will fire seventy other employees with me, just to employ seventy more and explain everything to them from scratch. What a waste of time, isn't it?'

A few weeks after that bittersweet evening, I received a message from her inviting me to a downtown bar for her birthday. I arrived a bit late; when I entered, I saw a group of mostly young women and (heterosexual) couples sitting in circle around a deserted pole dance platform. 'Where is Monica?' I asked her boyfriend. 'In the toilet, getting prepared', he said staring at the pole platform, seemingly seduced by the thought of what was about to happen. Shortly after, she arrived with a group of pole dance peers: one wore 'I love pole dance' branded gear,³⁹ two were in flashy bikinis, and Monica was in an elegant black bustier and culottes. One by one, they began performing mildly acrobatic tricks on the pole, which seemed to bore the guests, many of whom were pole dance students themselves. In a corner behind this flat audience, however, I saw an old man jumping from side to side to take pictures. 'Who's that man?' I asked Monica's boyfriend. 'He's the bar owner', he said smiling proudly, 'I'm sure he's never seen anything like this.' I looked at the crowd of customers who had gathered behind us to watch. 'I bet he will ask her to do it again', I replied, as Monica expertly twirled around the pole.

An hour later, Monica and her friends finished their show and went back to the toilet to change clothes. As soon as she stepped back into the main room, the bar owner intercepted her and they chatted at a corner table for a while. 'Did he ask you to do it again?' I asked Monica when she eventually returned to sit with us. 'Oh yes', she said outraged, 'But guess what? For free!' The old man was apparently soon to inaugurate a new bar in an industrial area, and he was looking to promote it. 'He asked us to do the same show in exchange for an aperitif. How dare he!' she said exasperated. 'Renting the platform alone cost me one hundred and fifty Euros!' she exclaimed, 'and anyway, that's work, isn't it?'

Like Kate, Ulrich and other young women I interviewed,⁴⁰ Monica articulated her sexualised self-display in public as partly glamorous, and hence pleasurable, and partly as a cost-effective way to earn the money she needed to buy what she prized – e.g. leisure, education, independence. The prioritisation of glamour and

³⁹ Besides pole dancing home kits, there is a flourishing market of pole dancing gear, DVDs, contests, and other similar items.

⁴⁰ In Chapter 4, I discuss the case of Maha, who analogously resorted to image work in order to pay her expenses while pursuing higher education.

cost-effectiveness shifted as Monica moved through different life stages, notably from a full-time employee at a public service institution to a full-time consumer of higher education. The owner's indecent offer for her to pay to perform at his bar in order to maximize his earnings shows another of the ambivalences surrounding striptease culture, which was observed by Price-Glynn:

The ushering of stripping into the mainstream may draw more amateurs into paid work. Alternatively, as these performances are more accessible, they may reduce patrons' attendance or strippers' pay. [...] Patrons may expect strippers to remove their clothing as 'fun', rather than 'work'. (2010: 36-37)

In the next section, I show how the value of women's erotic work has changed over time, due to both its mainstreaming in the sexualisation of culture and increasing economic precarity.

Dancing on a spiralling bottom

'I started stripping when I was a university student in London, to pay my university fees', said Milena, a Spanish woman I saw performing a Burlesque show at the Sexy Moon.

After graduation, I stopped and got normal jobs. Between one job and the other, I also did some Burlesque shows out and about, but now I've lost my job and things have turned bad. So now I've been working in this [Burlesque] for seven months in a row.

Milena's last ('normal') job was as the 'marketing director of a company owning thirty-eight hotels', and she lost it when the economic crisis drove her employer to downsize. 'And now you can't find anything in Spain', she continued,

the economic situation is far worse than in Italy. So one day, I looked myself in the mirror and said "you can still do it, you still have the body for that, you still can!" When you go back to this job as an adult who has studied – I have a degree, I had nice jobs...but eventually, I'm not crying out and about. I earn my money.

With a perfectly toned body, discreet mammoplasty and a sparkling attitude, Milena looked much younger than her age, which was the same as mine. Her recourse to erotic work appeared throughout different life stages. It first constituted a cost-effective way for her to access and successfully complete

higher education, thereby crossing into 'normal jobs'. It then became a flexible and cost-effective freelance job to buffer short periods of unemployment. Now, it has turned into her best way to manage economic insecurity before her sexualised self-display depreciates.

While her mother looks after her ten year-old daughter,⁴¹ Milena commutes bi-monthly to Italy to work as an erotic performer in different venues – night clubs, restaurants, municipalities. 'In Spain you can't do this job now, because there is prostitution', she explained glumly. 'You see the Spanish girls who are here tonight?' she asked, pointing to two young women at the bar conversing with male customers, one with a large colourful tattoo running from shoulder to elbow and the other sporting the latest punk-chic hairstyle; women I could have met just about anywhere. Milena continued:

Some have finished their university studies but can't find a job, others maybe need one more year to finish so they come here to work for a month and make some money. But in Spain, the only option to earn money fast is through prostitution. If a man in Spain pays fifty Euros to fuck, why would he spend that money just to see a naked woman dancing?! But here in Italy, there is a chance that you get fifty Euros only to strip.

However fast and flexibly Milena and her young Spanish colleagues move though, the ubiquity of amateur stripping, online porn, and the like is igniting a race to the bottom in terms of earnings, which is further exacerbated by economic recession:

Now there's internet [pornography], but not fifteen years ago: in these clubs you'd earn loads of money! It was impressive. But now? Nothing. People outside think we earn a lot and they can't believe it's not true. Obviously we earn more than a supermarket cashier, but... People have priorities and this is the last of them.

Within this spiralling scenario, Milena resorted to her erotic capital to cope with unemployment, insecurity and responsibility for her dependents. Simultaneously, more and more women and men in Western countries are turning any property or skill they possess into a tailored service on hire on an

⁴¹ In Chapter 5 I show how similarly Zeina, a Romanian woman employed as a lap dancer, manages to combine her breadwinning and maternal roles by relying on her mother's unpaid care work.

increasing number of portals and websites. While most praise the ‘sharing economy’ for its virtuous drive to optimise revenues from anyone’s capital or human asset (e.g. an empty bedroom, rideshares, electricity repairing skills, etc.), this process is riddled with ambiguities; a subject that is beyond the scope of this thesis. Importantly, however, ‘in a climate of continuing high unemployment’, people who resort to making a living through such ‘patch-work’ modality ‘are less microentrepreneurs than microearners [...] trying to assemble a living wage from a series of one-off gigs’ (Singer, 2014). As aptly described by Lauren Berlant, life in contemporary, late capitalist Western countries is characterised by ‘constant entrepreneurialism or on-the-make-ness’:

Everyone’s now a hustler: what varies is the verge and the risk. What used to be an exceptional form of subjectivity related to informal economies now pervades the officialised ones. (Berlant 2010a).

Milena’s return to full-time, informal work in erotic dancing shows how a woman’s erotic capital is an asset in times of precariousness. At the same time, she rejected anything even vaguely resembling pity. As we walked back into the club after our interview, she asked me what I wanted to convey through my research. ‘There’s so much moralism around sex work’, I said; thinking about the feminist sex wars’ debate around coercion and choice, I continued: ‘For example, I’d like to show how it is a rational response to poverty, insecurity even for...’. ‘No, no, no’, she said kindly,

It’s not only about poverty. Many women choose to do this job because they have a precise goal to achieve in two or three years’ time. They know this job is tough, but also that they will only do it for a while.

In the next and final section of this chapter, I highlight the class-based and racialised biases underlying the feminist sex wars’ debates on agency in prostitution/sex work.

Gifting work?

When I interviewed Zara, an Italian pole dance teacher and performer in her early twenties, she had recently finished university. For her graduation, she

asked her parents to gift her with a work internship abroad. 'Wow! You're tough, hey?!' I exclaimed, impressed by her work ethic, 'I've never heard of anyone asking to work for free as a gift...do you know anyone else who has done this?'

Not really...but I can travel when I want, so I don't care. I don't care about material things like clocks, pens. I own everything I need, or I can do it myself. The only thing I can't do by myself, also because I need a kick ('get out!'), is to gain an experience abroad. So when would be a better occasion than post-graduation, when I can fully take advantage of my degree and say to myself 'it was worth the effort'?!'

Although in control of many things – studies, professional sports practice – Zara does not feel emotionally or economically able to travel alone in pursuit of her goals: moving outside her ordinary space, boosting her self-development, putting to work the skills she cultivated throughout higher education, and earning a valuable first job experience. However, differently from Demi and many other migrant women whose West-ward work routes I discuss in Chapters 4 and 5, Zara is an Italian and EU citizen and can rely on her parents' economic and emotional support in gaining her first job experience. Such experience is increasingly elusive for so many young people, and it is not uncommon that many lose or underuse the skills developed through an increasingly pricy education, as well as self-confidence and self-worth, on the way.⁴²

But, if we conceive *work* as an intergenerational *gift*, what does 'freedom' mean in contemporary Western societies? And how does this shift affect our understanding of the connections between personal, social and spatial mobility?

In *The Gift. Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, Marcel Mauss described gift-giving as a 'total prestation' entailing 'the obligation to repay gifts received, [...] the obligation to give presents and the obligation to receive them', thereby knotting social relations in a moral texture connecting givers and

⁴² For example, when I was finishing to write this dissertation, a male peer employed in a catering industry told me that a young intern working in his department was unaware of his unpaid status. 'He asked me: "Do you think they'll keep me?"' recounted Luca, quoting his younger colleague who was concerned for his job, his only job since leaving high school. 'But hey, it's his mother paying his salary! But he doesn't know...' he said compassionately.

receivers across generations (1966: 10-11). 'Exchange was first and foremost a way of achieving social integration' (Graeber, 2001: 27), a purpose evident in the gesture of Zara's parents, as they wish to gift social inclusion through work. Such a gift, in turn, is also steeped in the promise of enjoying pleasure in consumption (Appadurai, 1996: 7). But what is exchanged in return? When work becomes a gift, what kind of social relations does it reveal and foster between the giver (parents), the given (young, willing, skilled and free of charge workers), and the receiver (an employer)?

For Carole Pateman, the employment contract is a 'distinctively modern form of subordination', as it entails 'a diminution of autonomy or self-government' in the worker, whose labour power cannot be alienated from his/her body (2002: 33). She posits that drawing boundaries between, and balancing amidst, 'property and commodification' is a key contemporary challenge, which demands the establishment of 'whether the right of self-government should continue to be (partially) alienable, and whether the renting of persons should continue to be deemed compatible with democratic citizenship' (*ibid.*: 52).

But who can afford not to be for sale?

Capitalism commodified time,⁴³ and if 'free time is time of consumption' (Appadurai, 1996: 79), freedom is 'an elusive commodity' (*ibid.*: 7). In 'a world characterized by weak [economic] growth and high return on capital', where income gaps are widening and the concentration of assets is worsening, long-term inequality in the distribution of wealth is rising (Piketty, 2014: 46). If not already, most of us are likely to become concerned by the deepening contradictions between consumerist-driven capitalism, the search for pleasure through consumption (Appadurai, 1996: 82-83), and the increasingly exclusive means to access this latter: work.

As revealed by the educational and professional trajectories of most of the young Italian and migrant women I interviewed or met during fieldwork, recourse to temporary, seasonal, occasional, and ad hoc erotic/sex work – in

⁴³ The phrase 'Time is Money' is attributed to Benjamin Franklin, one of the founding fathers of the US (quot. in Appadurai, 1996: 79).

between poorly paid or insecure jobs and in pursuit of better through an increasingly exclusive education – is a means for coping with life in a state of ‘constant entrepreneurialism or on-the-make-ness’ (Berlant, 2010a).⁴⁴ As expressed by Jo Doezema, a scholar and sex workers’ rights activist, ‘The idea that there are two distinct poles of “forced” and “free” is a false dichotomy. I mean who really freely chooses to work at any kind of job?’ (quot. in Chapkis, 1997: 52).

In this scenario, different positionings – as inflected by gender, class, race, nationality, age, etc. – are steeped in inequalities in terms of bargaining power in the exchange of one’s, however fictionally disembodied,⁴⁵ (manual, intellectual, affective, orgasmic) force to work for a wage or tariff. Addressing economic and welfare inequalities by moralising consumers – as, for example, abolitionists pursue via the Swedish model – contradicts the consumerist drive powering contemporary capitalism (Appadurai, 1996: 82-83). It also encapsulates a particular, rather than universal, position that is heavily inflected by the class and racialised positioning of the speaker advocating the right to establish whose pleasure and pain have worth, the means eligible to pursue more of the first within one’s lifetime, and the capacity to transmit these means as an intergenerational gift of social integration.

Conclusions

In this chapter, I discussed women’s engagement in activities involving sexualisation for pleasure and/or work in relation to symbolic processes of social class dis/identification. I argued that processes of respectability- claiming are key in enabling the shift of an erotic dance performed by women in male-

⁴⁴ Media representation of the relationship between economic insecurity and women’s recourse to erotic and sex work is also embedded with sensationalism, and the stigma surrounding sex work affects reliability of quantitative information on its transformation over time. For example, in a recent interview Carla Corso, the president and co-founder of Comitato, contested the representation of student sex work as an effect of the *contemporary* economic crisis: ‘But students’ sex work is not news! I remember that twenty years ago in a university city like Padua, girls used to sell themselves in bars, in pubs, etc. to the wealthy customers. Maybe they did so once a week to pay their fees, a better room, some extra dresses, etc. This issue of students is not news at all’ (2012).

⁴⁵ I discuss work and embodiment in Chapter 5.

patronised strip clubs (i.e. lap dance) to a consumer market mainly appealing to middle and working-class women who aspire to embody the glamour of contemporary striptease culture.

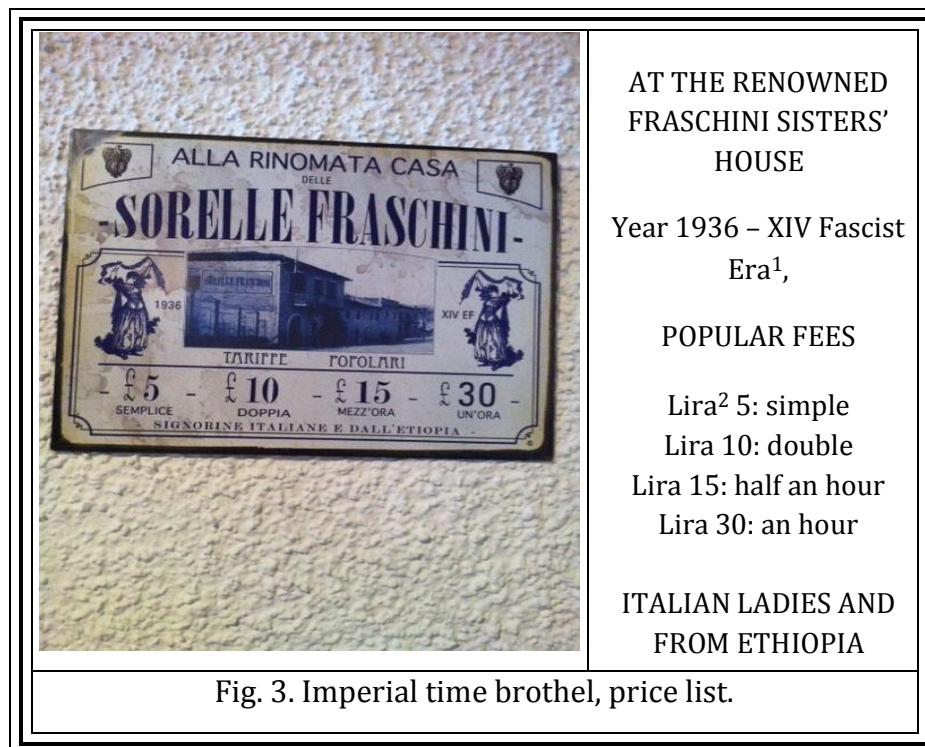
Consistent with analyses highlighting that in contemporary Western states, middle classes claim their class-based distinction (i.e. their respectability) through pleasure rather than virtue and sacrifice, scholars debating pole dancing's commercial success in the UK observe its emphasis on fun, pleasure, and glamour. Differently, pole dance entrepreneurs and teachers in Italy blended sacrifice and pleasure, virtue and glamour, and stressed their embodiment of pain, which they endured to excel in this practice (which is also their work). At the same time, such articulation of their gendered and class-based positioning as respectable feminine subjects, relied on the othering of their abject feminine other (i.e. lap dancers, but also image girls, both metonyms of the whore), whom they describe as lazy, opportunistic, idle. In so doing, women reproduced the century-long tropes used by Western middle classes to claim their distinction from the working class (men and women) and prostitutes.

In this chapter I also showed how the class-based and gendered hierarchies of women's worth reproduced through striptease culture become evident when women shift from dancing for pleasure to dancing for money, navigating across the spheres of consumption and work. This is reflected in women's narratives of the contradictions they experience when they shift from practising sexy dances for pleasure (i.e. as consumers) to practising them for a living (i.e. as workers), between status (i.e. social class) aspirations and material needs. To discuss the meaning of this ambivalence and ensuing contradictions, I engaged with feminist scholarship debating women's agency in prostitution/sex work, unpacking the role of class in shaping notions of morality and (erotic/sex) work within a broader scenario characterised by increasing economic precarity, and higher educational and living costs. Outside the binaries juxtaposing women's victimhood and empowerment, objectification and choice, this chapter showed that jobs in the erotic and sex markets enable some women to pursue higher

education as a means to access jobs they value. For others, they constitute flexible jobs they can make recourse to in order to buffer periods of economic precarity in-between jobs. I return to this discussion in Chapter 5, where I will focus on the meaning of embodiment and (sex) work, across the spheres of market and intimacy.

In Chapter 2, I argued that pole dancers' ambivalent attraction to the desirability emanating from the figure of their feminine abject (i.e. lap dancers, as metonyms of the whore) along with the fear of the gendered stigmas enwrapping this abject, prompts pole dancers to negotiate their display and consumption of sexuality through respectability claims. Their positioning as respectable feminine subject, however, relies on the othering of the whore. In this chapter, I discussed the class dimension of such othering processes; in the following Chapter 3, I explore the racialised and sexualised inflections of such processes.

**Chapter 4. Respectability and the white
heterosexual nation: nostalgia for the
lost brothel, racialised desire and
homophobia**



The placard above (Fig. 3) hung on the wall of a popular trattoria (restaurant) on the outskirts of Bologna; this hilly area was also the site of harsh clashes between the partisan Resistenza (Resistance) and the Nazi-allied armies during WWII.³ I first met Gina, who is the restaurant's chef and owner, approximately twenty years ago at a Communist Party fundraising festival, where we volunteered as chef and waitress respectively. Several years passed and our ideological fidelity withered away with the party's *trasformismo*,⁴ yet I could still not digest the sight of fascist memorabilia hanging in her restaurant, knowing full well her decades' long membership in the Communist Party. The placard not only evoked fascism, but also the Italian Empire that crowned the

¹ In official fascist history, the Fascist Era begins with the Fascist National Party's armed march on Rome (28 October 1922), after which the King of Italy gave Benito Mussolini the power to form a government (Duggan 2014: 206).

² 'Lira' was the currency used in Italy before its substitution with the Euro in 2002.

³ Italy entered WWII in 1940 as a Nazi ally. On 8 September 1943, the country signed an armistice deal with the Anglo-Saxon troops occupying the southern regions, while the northern regions were the site of battles between the Resistenza and the Nazi-fascist alliance (Duggan 2014: 242-243).

⁴ 'Trasformismo' is a term that indicates a party's loss of ideological consistency, whereby its recurrent transformations (e.g. shifting alliances, priorities, etc.) become more and more driven by a self-fulfilling goal of holding on to power. The term first appeared in national historiography to discuss how 'during the 1880s the old party labels of Left and Right lost their meaning as governments became shapeless amalgams of one-time opponents' (Duggan 2014: 161).

regime's aspirations of prestige and marked the apex of Italian colonialism.⁵ Last but surely not least, it reproduced a brothel price list – a puzzling décor for a woman's restaurant, especially given left wing parties' traditional abolitionist stance toward prostitution.

'Where did you find it?' I asked Gina when she sat at my table near closing time. 'That one?' she asked, nodding at the lone placard hanging on the wall, 'I bought it at a flea market somewhere around here.' I could see her eyes twinkling with mischief, as if the placard made some intimate statement about her, a naughtiness with which she teased her audience. Whether part of the seduction game itself or out of embarrassment, Gina promptly changed the subject, and I silently wondered when and how did an imperial brothel become glamorous.

A divorced woman in her early fifties, who owns and runs a small family business with her two sons and is a long-time member of the Communist Party, Gina's sympathy for the brothel aptly conveys Italy's contemporary, across-the-board longing for a return to state-regulated prostitution (hereafter: regulationism). Her unawareness or dismissal of the colonial implications of the brothel's advertising of 'Ethiopian ladies' further conveys the persisting amnesia and/or self-absolution surrounding Italy's colonialism and imperialism (see for example: Ben-Ghiat, 2006: 383; De Donno & Srivastava, 2006: 371). By opening the chapter with this image, which hung in a popular restaurant owned by a leftist woman, I wish to pinpoint contemporary Italy's affect and lingering nostalgia for the lost brothel, as well as the oblivion surrounding its colonial and imperial history. Italy, however, is also the country cradle and host of the Catholic Church, which has always maintained great influence over the moral and legal disciplining of sexuality – from marriage and divorce (Pollard 2008: 35-36) to abortion (Internazionale 2014). Therefore, unravelling the meanings underlying the widespread affect for regulationism requires also investigating

⁵ Italy claimed sovereignty over a part of Eritrea in 1882, and over the whole country in 1890, a year after the occupation of Somalia; in 1911, Libya came under Italian domination, and with the (thin, unstable and partial) seizure of Ethiopia in 1936, Mussolini proclaimed the establishment of the Italian Empire (Trento 2012), which also included Albania in 1939.

the role of the Church in enabling regulationism's long duration, as well as the periodic resurfacing of demands to reopen case chiuse (closed houses, i.e. tolerance houses).

The objective of this chapter is to disentangle the intersections of gender, race and sexuality underlying women's articulation of their positioning as respectable feminine subjects. In fact, when describing their customers, all pole dance entrepreneurs and teachers discursively conflated lap dancers and 'foreign' (i.e. non-Western migrant) women, racialising respectability and its counter – i.e. the whore stigma. This happened in a uniformly white space; a point also observed by other scholars analysing women's pole dancing (Donaghue & Whitehead 2011: 454; Whitehead and Kurz 2009: 231). Yet, such whiteness was fractured along racialised lines drawn on the basis of women's nationality.

In the wake of Anne McClintock's analysis of prostitutes as a group of social abjects that Western industrial imperialism ambivalently needed and despised (1995: 72),⁶ in this chapter I undertake a genealogy (Foucault 1984: 6) of prostitution laws in Italy, highlighting the role of such laws in making it a respectable – i.e. heterosexual and white – nation. I begin with a discussion of the interplay between respectability and nationalism, focusing in particular on the key role of regulationism in fostering, what I argue is, the special, long lasting, and enduring relationship between the two: it began with the birth of Italy as a nation-state, persisted throughout the country's dramatic post-WWII institutional changes until the closure of brothels in 1958 -⁷ the year when Italy's US-boosted economic miracle began - and still resurfaces periodically, such as in contemporary times. Subsequently, I engage with scholarship discussing Western countries' use of sexuality and race as devices of rule in their colonies and/or metropolises, and discuss the role of regulationism in the

⁶ 'Abject peoples' included 'slaves, prostitutes, the colonized, domestic workers, the insane, the unemployed, and so on' (1995: 72).

⁷ In 1946 Italy became a Republic and on January 1st, 1948 a new Constitution entered into force (Duggan 2014: 250-252). Women were for the first time granted the right to vote and be elected, however women prostitutes working independently (i.e. outside of brothels) were excluded from suffrage – a clause which was abolished the following year (Willson 2011: 235).

enforcement of racialised hierarchies of respectability, desirability and despise during Italian imperialism, which contributed to the self-construction of Italy as a 'white' nation.

Against this ethnographic backdrop, I then move on to discuss the contemporary racialised notion of respectability and segmentation of the pleasure, erotic and sex markets in Italy through a comparison with scholarship on other Western countries. To this end, I introduce the concept of 'exotic value' in order to navigate the different assemblages of desirability and despise embodied and/or performed by Italian women erotic and sex workers; such assemblages reflect a racialised temporality rooted in the history of the Western colonial encounter with African, American and Asian people. In conclusion, I discuss the roots of Italy's nostalgia for regulationism at the intersection of rising xenophobia and homophobia. This leads to an inquiry into the role of the Catholic Church in sustaining Italy's particularly suffocating heteronormativity, as attested by the country's enduring opposition to same-sex unions.

National respectability and its objects: women prostitutes

Consistent with Kristeva's concept of abjection (1982),⁸ Anne McClintock posited that prostitutes were simultaneously necessary for and despised by Western imperialism, rejected but necessary. Similarly, prostitution served both the ideologies of respectability and nationalism. In fact, to some extent, having a sufficient number of despicable women available to safeguard the chastity of middle-class women, and therein maintain purity in the biological reproduction of the nation (see for example: Nagel, 2003: 146; Yuval-Davis, 1997), was a concern shared by both ruling middle classes and the nation. In the course of the nineteenth century, respectability and nationalism gradually converged, contributing to nest bourgeois morality standards across all social classes (Mosse, 1996: 10). Both ideologies posited that women and men had biologically different sexual drives; given that men's was considered to be higher and more compelling, their morality was judged against a different, more

⁸ As discussed in Chapter 1.

tolerant standard, which granted them more indulgence in sex (Lyons & Lyons, 2011: 70). However, the boundary of men's indulgence was its heterosexual orientation. Both the 'solitary vice' (i.e. masturbation) and homosexuality were considered as threats to the orderly reproduction of society through the contextually ascending model of the natural – i.e. heterosexual – nuclear family (Mosse, 1996: 20-22). As women's respectability relied on their chastity (i.e. pre-marital virginity and the reproductive purpose for sex within marriage), the need for a group of abject women attracting the male sexual drive and maintaining its proper (i.e. heterosexual) orientation was compelling.

State-regulated prostitution of women – i.e. regulationism – was a top-down attempt to ensure that the nation's healthy biological reproduction satisfied the ideologies of respectability and nationalism. It provided a handy and affordable outlet for men to practice and cultivate their heterosexual orientation, while maintaining the grip of respectability on (especially middle-class) women's sexuality and offspring. The early seeds of regulationism arose in contexts where men were compelled to live for long periods of time in exclusive contact with one another, far away from women, such as in the army. Since as far back as Aristotle, the prostitution of women was considered a 'vaccine' for male soldiers' homosexuality (Rossiaud, 2013: 12); and at the dawn of the eighteenth century, Napoleon I set up the first medically supervised prostitution camps to preserve his troops' health (Gibson, 1999: 24) as they 'exported' French Revolution ideals across continental Europe. Preserving the health and vigour of the nation and its male soldiers also underlay the issuance of the Contagious Diseases Acts (CDAs) in England (1864-66), which disciplined the prostitution of women in some military districts:

As military reforms, the acts were linked to a conscious policy to create a professional bachelor army and navy without family ties or local identities; military authorities additionally hoped that, by offering enlisted men controlled outlets for heterosexual activity, they could curb homosexuality in the ranks as well. (Walkowitz, 1980: 4)

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, trajectories of regulationism differed significantly across Western nation-states;⁹ however, in nowhere else but Italy has regulationism been so long lasting and strictly entangled with nationalism. Indeed, I argue that Italian nationalism and regulationism are bonded by a special affective relation.

State-regulated prostitution of women was one of the first means that affectively bonded newly-made Italians to the nation. Respectability marked the class identity of the northern liberal bourgeoisie (see for example: Sorcinelli, 2001: 142; Wanrooij, 1990: 20-25), which engineered, in the second half of the eighteenth century, the building of the Italian nation-state to which regulationism contributed.¹⁰ Regolamento Cavour (Cavour Regulation), in fact, envisaged women prostitution camps as a means to safely cater to the sexual needs of military troops during the wars of conquest that led to the establishment of the Kingdom of Italy.¹¹ Upon marking the emergent nation-state's new frontiers, the decree was promptly expanded to include newly annexed areas, contextually replacing a 'patchwork of law and custom with a homogeneous statute applicable to all communes, urban or rural, that harboured prostitutes' (Gibson, 1999: 15). Between the Cavour Regulation and the law that, a century later, shut down brothels – the 'Merlin Law' (Repubblica Italiana, 1958) –¹² changes in the legal disciplining of the prostitution of women only concerned the degree of state surveillance.¹³ Regulationism was one of the very few elements of continuity that survived the dramatic post-WWII institutional changes that led, inter alia, to the abolishment of the Kingdom and the birth of the Italian Republic. By the time prostitution was decriminalised in

⁹ In the UK, for example, the CDAs were repealed after only twenty years (Walkowitz, 1980: 7).

¹⁰ Regolamento Cavour was issued on 15 February 1860, more than a year before the proclamation of the Kingdom of Italy on 17 March 1861.

¹¹ National history refers to this as *Risorgimento* (Resurgence), during which period the different political formations scattered across the Italian peninsula and main islands were conquered and/or annexed by what became a unified nation-state.

¹² The first bill of Law n.75/1958 was proposed by Angelina (Lina) Merlin, a socialist MP; hence, the 'Merlin Law', a term still widely used in reference.

¹³ The Crispi Regulation (1888) abolished compulsory registration for individual prostitutes, which was then reintroduced by the Nicotera Regulation (1891). After a brief suspension, compulsory vaginal checks and hospitalisation were reintroduced during WWI (Willson, 2011: 96). Fascism exacerbated medical and police control of registered prostitutes, and extended the capacity of police to repress solicitation (Bellassai, 2006: 25; see also: Willson, 2011: 136).

1958, Italy was the only Western European liberal democracy where regulationism was still enforced (Tambor, 2006: 134).¹⁴

The strict entanglement of the ideology of respectability and Italian nationalism is manifest not only in the long duration of regulationism, but also in its particularly centralised and authoritarian character. The key elements of regulationism called for the containment of prostitution within a chain of enclosed, state-surveilled spaces: the brothel, the hospital for venereal diseases, the prison and the corrections house (Corbin, 1985: 16-20). Italy was the only country that maintained centralised control over state-regulated brothels; other European countries managed such on a municipal scale (Gibson, 1999: 36). The state was directly implicated in enforcing a neat division between respectable and 'abject' women: respectable women remain confined in domesticity and 'abject' women were locked in a *casa chiusa* (closed house)¹⁵ or circulated with proof of their publicly authorised licence.¹⁶ The morality of any woman moving in between these two closed spaces was considered suspect by the state, as they could be enjoying sex outside the marital bond or exchanging it for money without state licensing. Accordingly, such a woman risked being arrested by the *polizia dei costumi* (morality police), subjected to a forced vaginal test and, if found ill, faced hospitalisation and mandatory registration as a prostitute (Gibson, 1999: 132), marking her almost irreversibly.¹⁷

According to Judith Walkowitz, extramarital sex in England under the CDAs 'became a question of state policy, a matter of vital national importance' (1980:

¹⁴ Spain and Portugal also enforced regulationism, but they were still ruled by the fascist regimes of Franco and Salazar respectively.

¹⁵ Italian people use the term *casa chiusa* (closed house) more frequently than brothel. The term derives from the law-mandated shutting of brothels' doors and windows (Gibson, 1999: 32); a symbolic measure devised to minimise 'social pollution' by keeping brothels as sealed and concealed as possible.

¹⁶ A woman wishing to sell sex either in licensed brothels or independently had to register with the public authorities and, from then onwards, undergo compulsory, bimonthly vaginal checks by state health officers. Health checks were recorded on a document which had to be always readily available for police inspection, either in the brothel (where it was kept by the owner/manager) or anywhere else if she worked independently (Gibson, 1999: 88)

¹⁷ Compulsory registration more likely hit 'migrant, unemployed and homeless women' rather than higher class sex workers – e.g. courtesans (Gibson, 1999: 148). Once registered, the police considered applications for cancellation only on the basis of 'marriage, sickness, entrance into a reformatory, initiation of an "honest" job, or the guarantee of support by a respectable citizen', but most such applications were unsuccessful (Gibson, 1999: 143).

5). Pressed by the abolitionist and social purity movements, England repealed this legislation after twenty years (*ibid.*: 7), but the national importance of policing sex did not wither away as fast in Italy. For the one hundred years following its birth, the nation-state tasked itself with checking that women invested their sexuality properly, channelling it towards either marriage or prostitution. The nation-state was, hence, directly engaged in enforcing a neat binary juxtaposing respectable vs. abject women, wives and mothers vs. whores. Yet, underneath this national imperative, there arguably lay a deeper and pre-existing intent: ensuring men's interest in women, a purpose shared by respectability and nationalism. I will return to this point in conclusion of this chapter.

In the next section, I show how fascist imperialism racialised the distinction between respectable and abject women, and imposed a hierarchy of desirability that placed white Italian women first. I later relate this racial twist to both the contemporary racialised notion of respectability and the segmentation of the pleasure, erotic and sex markets.

Racialised hierarchies of desirability

Influenced by Darwinian theories of natural selection,¹⁸ the nineteenth century middle classes enlisted sexuality in a discourse naturalising their rule both in the colonial dominions and in the homeland: race. According to Anne McClintock,

imperialism and the invention of race were fundamental aspects of Western, industrial modernity. The invention of race in the urban metropolis [...] became central not only to the self-definition of the middle class but also to the policing of the 'dangerous classes': the working class, the Irish, Jews, prostitutes, feminists, gays and lesbians, criminals, the militant crowd and so on. (1995: 5)

As an ideology reproducing and signalling middle class distinction, respectability was racialised accordingly. White Western people's colonial rule over black African women and men was presented as naturally consistent with the evolution of humankind, which supposedly ranged from 'primitive

¹⁸ Darwin theorised natural selection as a mechanism driving the evolution of the species, which culminates in the survival of the fittest.

promiscuity, marriage by capture, and exotic forms of sexual abuse' to the perfection of Victorian sexual morality as the apex of civilization (Lyons & Lyons, 2011: 68). Whereas 'confronted with lecherous save ancestors, [bourgeois white men] might excuse their visits to prostitutes as inevitable expressions of male nature', women were warned that their 'elevation above the primitive was tenuous at best and depended upon strict adherence to domestic norms' (*ibid.*: 70). Women's noncompliance with the norms restricting their sexuality was theorised as a sign of their incomplete evolution – i.e. of primitiveness – and/or a natural born deviance, which was posited by criminal anthropologists (Lombroso & Ferrero, 1903). The distinction between white dis-respectable women – i.e. prostitutes – and the hyper-sexuality of black people was deemed so tenuous that, by the end of the nineteenth century, 'the perception of the prostitute [...] merged with the perception of the black' (Gilman, 1985: 229).

Racialised respectability crucially influenced the imagination of Italy and its nation-building project. For north-western Europeans troubled by their self-imposed, distinctive and constrained sexuality, southern Europe was 'both "Africa" and *terra vergine*, a reservoir of feudal residues, sloth, and squalor on the one hand and of quaint peasants, rustic traditions, and exotica on the other' (Moe, 2002: 3; see also Mosse, 1996: 22). They imagined Italy as primitive and archaic (Teti, 1993: 15), but also exotic; for example, Grand Tour travellers' tales depicted Italian women as loose and promiscuous (Gundle, 2007: 3-4). When the northern Italian liberal bourgeoisie launched the nation-building project, it refracted this racialised imagery onto its southern regions in an attempt to present the nation as 'modern' and 'civilised' (Moe, 2002). The othering of Italy's southern regions was aptly conveyed by an officer of the emerging nation-state:

Dear friend of mine, what kind of countries are these [...] What barbarity! What Italy! This is Africa; Bedouins, compared to these bumpkins, are the cream of civic virtue! [...] Even bumpkin women kill; and worse, they tie gentlemen (this is the name they give to liberals) from their testicles and tug them like this

down the street. Then, they make ziffe zaffe:¹⁹[such] horrors [that are] impossible to believe hadn't they happened here, around and among us. (Farini quot. in De Francesco, 2012: 85)

Struggling against a north-driven process of unification (Cutrufelli, 1974), southern resistance was presented as the product of barbaric people, as conveyed through the emphasis on (bumpkin) women's agency and defiance of the domesticity with which respectable – i.e. modern and civilised – women ought to comply.²⁰ Similar to native people's anti-colonial struggles against Western rule, southern resistance was 'disavowed and projected onto anachronistic space: prehistoric, atavistic and irrational, inherently out of place in the historical time of modernity' (McClintock, 1995: 40). By the end of the nineteenth century, southern people's subordination to the industrial north was naturalised through race. Northern Italians' lineage was linked to a white, Euro-Asiatic population characterised by a cold, rational and sexually self-contained 'psychology'; while southerners, by contrast, were linked to a black African population, making them "passionate", individualistic, with scant morality and organizational spirit' (Niceforo quot. in Teti, 1993: 16). This racialised internal fracture was (temporarily) blanketed by fascism, and shifted on the borders of the nation-turned-Empire (Ben-Ghiat, 2006: 382).

During fascist imperialism,²¹ state-regulated prostitution of women was specifically enlisted by the regime as a tool for 'making Empire respectable' (Stoler, 1997). Ann Maria Stoler argued that, in French Indochina and the Dutch East Indies of the early twentieth century, the distinction between colonisers and colonised, citizens and subjects, rested on the regulation of 'the sexual, conjugal, and domestic life of *both* Europeans in the colonies and their colonized subjects' (1997: 345). Analogously, the British Empire considered that its borders 'could be secured and upheld only by proper domestic discipline and decorum, sexual probity and moral sanitation' (McClintock, 1995: 47); by the

¹⁹ It is the onomatopoeic translation of a sword snipping.

²⁰ Significantly, during the southern peasants' decade long struggle against their colonial spoliation, the national press presented rebel women as whores (Cutrufelli, 1974: 162-163).

²¹ By using the expression 'fascist imperialism', I am not suggesting that Italian colonialism was a brief parenthesis coinciding with the fascist regime; instead, I am suggesting that imperialism was an aspiration explicitly pursued and enacted by the fascist regime.

outburst of WWI, 'outside of the fighting services, almost no sexual interaction between rulers and ruled occurred' (Hyam, 1998: 1). Compared to any other Western European colonial power, Italy's approach to the regulation of sexual relations between white Italian male settlers and Arab and African women in the colonised territories had, instead, been quite uniquely hands off. However, as anticipated in the introduction of this chapter, academic literature on Italian colonialism does not discuss whether and to what extent Arab and African women were enlisted to work in Italian brothels in the colonies or colonial metropolises.

Before the proclamation of the Italian Empire in 1936, sexual relations were widely and openly practiced, generally in the form of colonial concubinage (see for example: Trento, 2012; Merrill, 2006: 102). However, when the Empire was proclaimed, it shrouded these relations in illegality and shame. The limitation of sexual contact between Italian male settlers and native women under occupation became a tool for establishing racial prestige; to this purpose, the regime designed a racial demographic policy relying on the import of sufficient quantities of both respectable and abject, yet white Italian women.²²

Hence, regulationism ought to (have) work(ed) in the service of the white nation, safeguarding its purity and facilitating its imperial aspirations of rule in virtue of (a self-declared, alleged) racial superiority. During the seizure of Ethiopia, the availability of white women prostitutes was already a concern for the Italian government, who sought to preserve high military officials from improper sexual contact 'with coloured *sciarmutte*' (Gorresio, quot. in Stefani, 2007: 132).²³ After the establishment of the Italian Empire, the exoticism of African women – which was used by the regime to galvanise men's participation in the colonial enterprise – disappeared (Trento, 2012), and instead they were depicted as dirty, ugly, and dumb (Sbacchi, 1985: 191-193; see also Goglia &

²² For example, it recommended family-based migration in order to avoid 'the social damage brought by concubinage with native women resulting in the procreation of considerable groups of illegitimate half-caste which are difficult to absorb within a civilized system' (Livi quot. in Goglia & Grassi, 1993: 281).

²³ The term '*sciarmutte*' is the vernacular equivalent of the Arabic term '*sharmuta*', which means whore. Vittorio Gorresio was a journalist travelling to Ethiopia as a war reporter.

Grassi, 1993: 298). Fresh regulations required male settlers to bring their marital families as early as possible, in order to cease any concubinage with native women. In addition,

until when local conditions impose the permanence in Oriental Africa of a big mass of soldiers and workers who necessarily cannot bring their families along for a number of life difficulties, [it is recommended to] set up 'tolerance houses', even mobile, with white race [sic] women, absolutely prohibiting access to natives.²⁴ (quot. in Sbacchi 1985: 190)

During fascist imperialism, the state enforced a hierarchy of desirability that privileged white women prostitutes over black African woman, as well as established that white women were beyond black African men's reach. Since African women were structurally othered by the 'respectable' Italian Empire, the only position they could occupy was that of cheap, readily available 'sexual objects' (Stefani, 2007: 108). The image at the beginning of this chapter (Fig. 3) confirms that the blackness, embodied by Ethiopian women, was ambivalently desired and despised, exotic but shameful. In fact, pride in the imperial conquest notwithstanding, Ethiopian women's presence in the brothel is simultaneously affirmed by the price list's advertisement of their presence and partially obfuscated by the whiteness of the women drawn there.²⁵ I argue that these imperialist-enforced hierarchies of racialised desirability are mirrored in the contemporary segmentation of the pleasure, erotic and sex markets in Italy, where, as I will show throughout this Chapter, whiteness prevails all along. At the same time, whiteness is internally fragmented according to women's position vis-à-vis the nation where they're living and working.

In the next section, I begin showing how Italian women often articulated their positioning as respectable feminine subjects through their nationality, hence racialising the whore stigma.

²⁴ These are the directives sent, on 5 August 1936, by the Italian Ministry of Colonies to the vice-king. In parallel, the regime organised training courses for Italian women to teach them *basic* skills for living in hostile contexts: first aid, water sterilisation, tropical hygiene, *musket* shooting, et al. (Willson, 2011: 158).

²⁵ However, the brothel price list does not distinguish tariffs according to women's colour. Later in this chapter, I show that today's sex market prices often reflect racialised assumptions on women's sexuality, as for example reflected in black women's lower earnings and employability.

Drawing respectable borders

Lucia is a renowned pole dance entrepreneur, teacher and performer whose career took off after she performed at the 2011 Sanremo Festival of the Italian Song. 'When they called us, I thought it was a joke!' she said, hinting at the visibility and legitimacy gaps between her largely unknown and stigmatised activity and the stage of a popular and long established cultural celebration of Italianness.²⁶ Besides flattery and excitement, she approached this opportunity hesitantly:

In parallel, there were Arcore's parties²⁷ and tales of Berlusconi's girls hanging on the pole, because obviously he has a night club in his villa...and I remember he said in an interview that they were doing Burlesque and pole dance...So, at first, I thought 'what the fuck! If we go to the festival, we end up defending Berlusconi; no, no, I don't want!' But then, things turned out differently.

Amidst the sexual morality turmoil ignited by Sexgate, Lucia's pole dance performance could have contributed to either normalising the despicable behaviour of dis-respectable women participating in the prime minister's parties, or sanctioning pole dancing's respectability via its popular endorsement. The show's aesthetic (imsonica 2011) was consistent with my discussion of the glamour emanating from striptease culture in Chapter 3: performers tied their hair in chignons, wore elegant full length costumes and medium-heeled black shoes, and sported rigid, silver(-like) necklaces resembling the iconic chain of white pearls. While the performers swung between the poles, where they staged basic acrobatic tricks, and the black chairs for (sexy) chair dance, the backing music told the tale of a woman's supernatural and faithful bond to the man she loved. Lucia's gamble paid off; her participation in the festival not only paved the way for pole dance's commercial boom, but is also recorded as the official beginning of pole dance history in Italy (D'Amico 2014a). 'After Sanremo, a girl wrote to thank me,' Lucia recalled:

²⁶ The Sanremo Festival was first celebrated in 1951, and continues until today. The other national-popular event contending with the festival is the Miss Italia (Miss Italy) beauty pageant, which dates back to 1946 – the year the Republic of Italy was itself established.

²⁷ In Chapter 1 I explained the meaning of this term, highlighting its connection to Sexgate.

She said, 'Thanks to this exhibition, I was finally able to tell my husband and parents that I practice this sport. It gave me courage, because it was seen as a discipline that had nothing to do with...[lap dancing? Sexgate?]'

As the quote above portends, such popular endorsement enabled the acceptance of pole dancing as a fitness and leisure activity for respectable women. However, the discursive construction of national respectability relied on the racialisation of the whore stigma. Such discursive construction emerged early in my fieldwork, and alerted to this othering process, I always included a question on pole dance students' nationality in my interviews with entrepreneurs, teachers and performers. When I asked, most of my interviewees nuanced their all-inclusive marketing message by voicing different reasons why foreign women were absent from their customer base. 'What is the average profile of your school's students?' I asked Floriana, an Italian pole dance entrepreneur and Burlesque consumer. 'There's a bit of everything,' she replied a bit condescendingly, 'from the surgeon to the lawyer, from the architect to the university student.' 'Italians and foreigners alike?' I asked.

Mainly Italians. We don't have many foreigners. When we opened, we were sure we'd be flooded with Eastern European girls who work in night clubs and want to learn something more. But the truth is that we have none, probably because they're not interested in it. I also think that the cost of the course matters: nowadays, to pay seventy Euros a month is no small thing...

Faced with my question about her students' nationality, Floriana immediately began talking about Eastern European lap dancers – i.e. (white) foreign women whose job allegedly signals their dubious morality. 'Tell me something about your students,' I asked Francesca, 'who are they, on average?' 'It's a mixed fry,' she replied, seemingly uninterested in sketching her students' profile. When I asked whether they were Italians or foreigners, her dismissal suddenly switched to stiffness:

I have very few foreign students. Luckily, I have very few girls who work in night clubs and come to learn pole dance, because automatically the relationship breaks down and they are difficult to manage. I had several experiences and none of them end well.

Francesca's conflation of foreign women and lap dancers, along with her dismissal of any compatibility between pole and lap dancers, was quite neat.²⁸ Other interviewees echoed this reaction. 'My students?' Uga asked herself, repeating my question, 'They're from any age bracket. I have sixteen year-old girls up to a sixty-five years old. Anyone's welcome.' 'Are there foreigners as well, or are only Italians?' I asked. Like Francesca, Uga promptly switched from an all-inclusive marketing message to a morality-inflected, racialised profiling of her customers:

I only have a few foreign [women]. I have some, but only a few, also because this is a very sporty environment, because we come here to train ourselves and work out, not to show off, get it? It's different.

Significantly, and consistent with my analysis of social class and respectability in Chapter 3, Uga's discursive erasure of foreign women blended a range of tropes that construct middle-class respectability through the othering of working-class women, men and prostitutes. Such tropes juxtapose bourgeois (men's) work ethic with working-class idleness and bourgeois women's modesty with prostitute's vanity.

Not all pole dance entrepreneurs and teachers stiffened at my question on their students' nationality. For example, Federica meticulously listed the wide range of students attending her classes: all age brackets and body sizes, including 'a male rugby player who comes for the [high quality] workout.' When I asked if all her students were Italian, she gave an indignant reply, as if my question hinted at some implicit prudishness of hers:

Absolutely not! There are foreigners too; in this city we have many Eastern European girls who came in search of fortune. You know, many of them started as night club dancers, so they come here to prepare their evening shows, to learn technical tricks that can help them earn more money. But there's a bit of everything, and seriously I have no prejudices against anyone.

Although non-judgemental, Federica also conflated foreign women – Eastern European women, more precisely – with lap dancers, as metonyms of the abject

²⁸ I commented this quote also in Chapter 3, footnote 21, in relation to lap dancers' 'dirty' money.

feminine other (i.e. the whore). Conversely, Italian women are implicitly constructed as respectable.

Such finding is consistent with Esther Bott's analysis of how (white) British working-class women, migrating to Tenerife and working as lap dancers, articulated their gendered and class-based distinction (i.e. their respectability) through the racialised abjection of the whore, epitomised by the figure of the (similarly white) Eastern European lap dancer (2006: 38).²⁹ Significantly, Ulrich, a Romanian pole dance teacher and performer, reacted to this racialised stereotype by turning it on its head; in other words, by stressing her fellow countrywomen's higher work ethic and sporty discipline vis-à-vis Italians.

Teaching here and in Romania is totally different. In Italy you come to have fun, for the company, for the atmosphere in the school. There it's much sportier. I've attended several classes and it's very rigid, like in any Eastern European sports school. You have to do everything perfectly.

The racialised figure of the whore, as epitomised by the abject Eastern European lap dancer, also emerged in Maria Pia's interview. Maria Pia is a fifty year-old Italian woman who has long worked as a blend-in image girl³⁰ in discos to supplement her main income. Married at a very young age and already pregnant,³¹ throughout her wedded years Maria Pia had to constrain her

²⁹ Bott suggested that the figure of the Eastern European lap dancer is:

'at once feared, pitied and resented - feared for her abjection and ruthless drug-dealer boyfriend, pitied for her victimhood (having being trafficked against her will and beaten by her pimp), and resented for her desperation and willingness to sell sex and 'do extras', thus degrading the work of lap dancers' (2006: 38).

³⁰ For the purpose of this dissertation, and based on my interviewees' description of their job-mandated tasks, I elaborate a distinction between what I term 'blend-in' and 'sit-in' image girls. The distinguishing characteristic of the first category is that, as the name suggests, they are required to blend into the crowd and pass as ordinary customers, albeit alluring and friendly. As Monica, a blend-in image girl, explained, they have 'to be present, but at the same time you have to blend into the crowd. The customer does not have to understand that you are an image girl and, hence, you're there to make him spend money.' Differently, the management explicitly allocates sit-in image girls as private entertainers for male customers, whose wishes they have to accommodate by juggling a kaleidoscope of prosthetic roles (e.g. the booty, the entertained, the cheer-up lady, the seductress, the seduced, the novice, the carer, etc.). As Kate, a sit-in image girl, explained, they also have 'to make the table beautiful, because it is ugly to see a men-only table, so they send two girls for company.'

³¹ Notwithstanding the Catholic dictate for women to be virgin upon marriage, as 'proved' by a bride's bleeding on the first night of marriage as a result of the breaking of the hymen, at the beginning of the twentieth century premarital sex among engaged couples was customary in rural northern areas, as the marriage proposal superseded the wedding ceremony in importance (Willson, 2011: 15). For peasants, a woman's fertility was so valuable that many

passion for dancing because her husband would not accompany her. 'He was such a couch potato!' she exclaimed, hinting at the boring stillness of their marital life, 'and until I divorced, I had deal with it!' Moreover, well into the 1950s, the Catholic Church considered dancing to be 'indecent and sinful' (Cullen, 2013: 37). After her divorce, which is not recognised by the Catholic Church (Müller 2013), Maria Pia's fear of being stigmatised as a whore prevented her from going out dancing. 'I did not want to call a baby sitter to go out dancing because, to tell you the truth, I felt a bit of a whore at the thought of it', she recounted. When her daughter came of age and could stay home alone, Maria Pia allowed herself to go dancing in discos with her female friends. One day, during a fortune-teller course, the friends were approached by a fellow student, Stefania, who asked if they were interested in 'being paid to go dancing'. A former go-go dancer in Eastern Riviera discos,³² Stefania managed the workforce of image girls for a man who owned several discos in the area, including the one Maria Pia and her friends regularly patronised. Maria Pia explained the background of this job offer:

He [the disco owner] told Stefania, 'Listen, I need to give an incentive for people to come dancing, especially men. Can you find me some normal girls, pretty, neither astounding,³³ nor foreigner, who know how to dress well, how to move, who are smiling, and able to fake that they truly like dancing?' (h)

Maria Pia's laughter betrayed the pleasures intrinsic to the (heterosexual) desirability status this job crystallised, but also some embarrassment for the promiscuity it entailed. 'But why didn't the manager want foreign girls?' I asked, mindful that conversational skills were not essential to work as a blend-in

couples would wait for the confirmation of pregnancy before getting married (Parca, 1965: 84; see also Sorcinelli, 1993: 306).

³² It is an area on Italy's north-eastern coast that is a renowned summer holiday destination for young people's night entertainment-oriented holidays, as well as for sex tourism. Some of the women I interviewed worked in this area on occasion.

³³ A criteria for selecting image girls seems to be their embodiment of a mild, rather than exceptional, heterosexual desirability. For example, Monica recalled that male customers preferred approaching image girls who 'were slightly uglier than us', concluding that 'maybe an exceptional beauty intimidates them and, hence, they don't approach you.' The precautionary character of enforcing a 'beauty ceiling' on women employed to play a prosthetic role for masculinity in night entertainment venues was similarly observed by Anne Allison in her ethnography on hostess clubs in Tokyo: hostesses were 'common, normal, usual. They were not unapproachable', so as not "to remind men of their own limitations and insecurity' (1994: 63).

image girl. After freezing for a moment, she started to swing anxiously between foreign women and night club girls (i.e. lap dancers):

I mean, he tried to take some foreign women for a change, because we were the same group for fifteen years and, eventually, people are not stupid. So he took girls who basically worked in a night club; some were foreign and some were Italians. But foreigners [...] had this bad habit of promoting drinks, and he did not want that. He wanted to keep the disco reputation because he'd need to have other permits, because the police, carabinieri, the fiscal police, they often come to check. And foreign girls give the idea of there being another kind of people, of workers [...] And customers were fed up with having their legs pulled.

Maria Pia's fear of being stigmatised as a whore is clear from her denial of what all the other image girls I interviewed stated as their core task, i.e. alcohol promotion,³⁴ which is also lap dancers' main function in night clubs. I wondered whether her despise for foreign colleagues for 'pulling customers' legs' ought to be redirected towards men's racialised expectations of their promiscuity. 'Maybe customers thought that they'd offer them a drink and then afterwards...' I tentatively suggested. 'Well there surely was an afterward!'³⁵ she exclaimed, finally cobbling together a steady position from where she could disavow the gendered stigma of the whore:

In fact, when we went back to work some customers told us: 'hey you, how much do you want to spend a night with you?' This is shameless! And we said clearly: 'look, nothing, because we won't spend the evening with you, we belong to another race [emphasis mine], so that's it.' A couple of requests, maybe three, then nobody ever asked us this anymore. But because it's obvious, foreigners give precisely this idea of being easy, approachable, and that there's an afterwards, so to speak, and this is precisely the impression that the owner does not want to give. So he's very reluctant to employ foreign girls for this reason, for this impression that...then he employs some, but occasionally, and not from that group of girls from the night club.

³⁴ As relayed by most image girls I interviewed, the core function of both blend-in and sit-in image girls is to prompt male customers to consume more alcohol. Differently from lap dancers, however, image girls do not receive commission on the drinks they help sell. For example, as Kate explained, disco managers send image girls 'to tables where there are only men, especially old ones with money. We have to make them drink, and spend money.' Similarly, Monica, a blend-in image girl, explained that her core function is to attract men, 'and when he offers you a drink, you obviously have to make him spend as much as possible because that's where the venue earns'.

³⁵ 'The afterward' is image girls' jargon for the sale of sex acts after the entertainment a customer consumed on the disco's premises.

Similar to Italian pole dance entrepreneurs and teachers, Maria Pia disavows the whore stigma by projecting it onto foreign women, contextually claiming to embody respectability in virtue of her nationality. Meanwhile, the widespread assumption – by male customers, disco owners, and the police – that foreign girls are whores signals the endemicity of this racialised, gendered stereotyping.

In other cases, a woman's nationality was taken as an indicator of her higher 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu 1986: 47) vis-à-vis foreign colleagues. For example, when I asked Eleonora how she chose which night clubs to perform in, she made distinction on the basis of night clubs' 'cleanliness',³⁶ which included the presence of Italian women as workers:

There are clubs where they only look for women on the game, so you go there and you don't earn a penny. Either they throw you out or you leave, because you think: 'what am I doing here? I'm not making a penny, I don't give a shit!' Then there are places where you work with quality, where cleanliness is absolutely maintained, all of that, and where they look for the Italian [worker] because they need culture, someone who can speak properly, who can entertain a 'certain' kind of table; a table with people who have money but want to have some quality as well. So you go there, you do a good show, and it works!

Contextually, foreign women are implicitly constructed as cheap workers employed by 'dirty' clubs, suggesting that they are most likely prostitutes. Mirca, also an acrobatic stripper, similarly claimed her higher technical and artistic skills vis-à-vis foreign women:

I had a costume under another costume, under another costume, there was a plot, then there was the acrobatics...I mean, you invent something! Whereas in foreigners' shows, they strip and open their legs. Basically they show it [the vagina], that's it.

At the same time, Mirca did not identify Italianness with respectability. Instead, she considered her fellow countrywomen to be 'the bitchiest' due to their, also, lesser technical skills than her:

³⁶ Like Eleonora, most lap dancers and night club employees I interviewed used the dirt/clean dichotomy to signify the sale of sex acts within a night club premises that however constitutes a violation of the Merlin Law. In Chapter 3, footnote 21, I discussed the symbolic meaning of 'dirt' for Victorian ('respectable') middle classes.

Maybe because most can't use image and sympathy. If a girl can dance in a sexy way, if she gives fantasies to the customer, she gets to work. Most of the girls who do this job dance as if they were in a disco, or anyway they can't bewitch the customer, so they start telling dirty jokes and, after, they have to start 'doing'. Most aren't cunning.

Cognizant that her nationality could not shield her from the gendered stigmatisation of her job, Mirca eventually resorted to a relativistic position, stating that all women can potentially be whores:

I'm ok with my consciousness; I did not make 'whatever'. One can think what he [masculine in original] wishes, but then maybe his sister or his mother who stays at home doing nothing is bitchier than one [a lap dancer] who sees men in a night club, but she knows what they wants from her and she's even tired of seeing them. I mean, the truth is that you can't judge a book by its cover. (h)

As I later show, Maha – an Italian woman working as an image girl, whose darker skin exacerbated her affective distance from the nation – assumed a similarly relativistic subject position.

In the next section, I discuss how colour inflected the articulation of the dis/respectable feminine subject through blending despise and desirability, and reflecting itself on the racialisation of the leisure, erotic and sex market niches I researched.

The racialisation of the pleasure, erotic and sex markets

As part of my fieldwork, I attended open days at pole dance schools, observed their aspiring customer basin and saw the range of courses on offer. One such event I attended was around Christmas time, in the industrial outskirts of a small city in the middle of the Po Valley. The number of attendants exceeded expectations, and the free, hour-long class had to be split in two in order to ensure that everyone could have a trial. Impressed by the crowd gathered in the school's tiny training room, I took a seat on the floor, squeezed amidst a group of women. 'Wow! That was tough!' I heard a female voice exclaim behind me. I turned toward the voice and met the eyes of an intensely tanned woman in her forties with short platinum blonde hair, flashy golden earrings and necklace. 'Indeed,' I replied, 'pole dancing is tougher than most people think.' 'Good,' she said, tightening her arms around the Yves-Saint Laurent bag she held across her

legs. 'It's years now that I've been horse riding and doing fitness in the gym; I'm fed up with it.' Having become aware of pole dancers' negotiation of their consumption and sale of this practice through chastity, hard work and embodied pain, as shown in Chapters 2 and 3, I doubted that fitness was the only motivation driving this distinguished woman to try an activity still largely associated with strippers. 'Are you planning to start a course?' I asked her. 'I've been thinking about it a lot, but I've been hesitant until now,' she said, shifting her eyes to take in a full visual reconnaissance of the training room,

I expected to see a herd of foreign women hanging to a pole, but I see only normal women: Italian and from any age bracket. I feel it is a proper environment.

Sitting amidst a crowd of silent strangers watching the trial class, I wondered what but the room's uniform whiteness could have signalled to her such 'Italianness'.

The above extract from my field notes exemplifies the discursive conflation of respectability, Italianness and whiteness, as well as its contingent racialised othering of respectable women's abject, i.e. the whore. UK scholars also observed the overwhelmingly white, middle-class profile of pole dancers (Ngaire Donaghue and Whitehead, 2011: 231; Holland, 2010: 92); however, the reasons why black and minority women are absent have not been fully explored. More widely, Angela McRobbie posited a useful critique of this racialised connotation, arguing that the 'sexual freedoms' heralded by 'raunch culture' (Levy 2006) are only accessible to white women:

For Afro-Caribbean young women, whose sexuality is always regarded as suspect by the state, being drunk and disorderly while also dressed like a prostitute is not a risk worth taking [due to] virulent racism which assumes sexual availability, appetite or else which assumes that poverty makes prostitution or addiction a likelihood. (McRobbie 2009: 87)

This quote points to the legacy of the respectability-borne, racialised construction of black women's hyper-sexuality. During the nineteenth century, this was symbolised by the 'Hottentot Venus' alias for Sarah Baartmann, a

Khoikhoi woman taken from Cape Colony, South Africa to London to display the 'ab-normality' of her 'sexual parts' – i.e. buttocks and genitalia (Gilman, 1985: 213; see also Magubane, 2011: 46). In the same period, (white European) prostitutes were deemed as 'the metropolitan analogue of African promiscuity', and represented as 'white Negroes' (McClintock, 1995: 56).

Interestingly, the trajectory of pole dance – from sex-charged and stigmatised strip clubs to exclusive schools for respectable (white) women – mirrors the path of several 'sexy social dances' that became popular in the US in the twentieth century.³⁷ Judith Lynne Hanna (2010: 226) recounts that these dances attracted white people because they were practiced by Black and Latinos; mimicking their dance moves, Whites engaged in self-sexualisation and transgressed the class-based and racialised constraints on their display of sexuality. Yet, for these dances to move from the anachronistic space of primitive hyper-sexuality onwards – i.e. into mainstream 'modernity' – they had to be 'co-opted, "sanitized" (made less sexy), and stylized by Whites' (*ibid.*: 226). I define this process as 'whitestreaming', whereby a practice's entry into the Western mainstream entails the whitening of its consumer base.

I suggest that the whitestreaming of pole dance in contemporary Italy entails the discursive erasure of its first practitioners - i.e. migrant women erotic workers - whose position in the Western racialised temporality above outlined, and discussed more in details later in this section, would correspond to that of the 'white negroes' (i.e. white prostitutes).

'I understand that you discovered pole dancing while you were working in night clubs, correct?' I asked Eleonora, who had spent years juggling BA studies and a job as an acrobatic stripper before becoming a pole dance teacher.³⁸ 'No, it was born meanwhile,' she stressed, implicitly conveying her frustration with pole dancers' abjection of lap dancers, as she had been throughout higher education.

It could never be born in a gym. The first contests were organised in night clubs: they would call the five best pole dancers in Italy to open the season.

³⁷ For example, the fox trot, Charleston and many more (Hanna, 2010: 226).

³⁸ I recounted Eleonora's study and work trajectory in Chapter 2.

That's how it was born. When the first Romanian girls arrived, they were super good; they were monsters! Because most of them were former gymnasts and they could do amazing tricks [...] at the level of what today is considered sport,³⁹ but they were doing it ten years ago, when still nothing existed...Then, obviously, it began to spread and some people were farsighted.

As signalled by the excerpt from my field notes, part of this farsightedness – i.e. the profitability of the pole dancing business – relied on and reproduced a racialised conflation of respectability, Italianness and whiteness. The absence of any black or minority woman among the pole dance teachers, performers and students I interviewed or encountered confirms this racialised pattern. In line with McRobbie, I suggest that the enduring legacy of the association of blackness with primitive hyper-sexuality makes a thinly respectable activity, such as pole dancing for pleasure, largely inaccessible to black women. Further research into Western countries where the mainstreaming of pole dancing has a longer history (e.g. UK and USA) could test the wider applicability of this suggestion.

As it is becoming evident, hence, whiteness is internally fractured along racialised lines drawing hierarchies of women's worth on the basis of their nationality. This holds true also in the erotic and sex market niches I observed, where amidst the overwhelming prevalence of whiteness, migrant women and M2F workers occupied the cheapest and most stigmatized positions. Much academic literature⁴⁰ cites the prevalence of whiteness in the most respectable and/or profitable niches of the erotic/sex markets, and my fieldwork in night clubs further confirms this observation. Although I occasionally saw Arab women working as lap dancers or erotic performers, black women were absent altogether. Whiteness was prevalent also among street sex workers, who were mostly migrant women from Eastern European countries (Albania, Romania, Moldova, Serbia, etc.); black women were often stationed in the darkest and most inconvenient locations, and elicited the cheapest services: at the time of

³⁹ She refers to 'pole fitness' i.e. the sporty and athletic evolution of pole dance I described in Chapter 2.

⁴⁰ On cabaret and strip clubs, see: Law (2012) for Canada; Price-Glynn (2010: 5), Brooks (2010) and Egan (2006: 39) for the US; Dahinden (2010: 324) for Switzerland. For brothels, see Hausbeck & Brents (2010).

my fieldwork, the average price for a fifteen minute standard sexual service (i.e. oral and vaginal penetration) was ten Euros for black women and thirty Euros for white women.

At the same time, (erotic and sex) workers can perform race in order to enhance the economic value of their desirability. 'Where did your colleagues come from?' I asked Roberta, a white Italian sex worker in her early twenties who regularly works in countries where the sale of sexual services is legal. When I interviewed her, she had just returned from working in a Swiss brothel near the Italian border. 'They were mostly Eastern Europeans, but there were also some Italians, Germans, French, Spanish... we were fifty approximately. And there were two Africans too,' she replied. 'And what was work like?' I asked. 'Ok, normal. There were tons of Italians [customers] to whom I disguised myself as Eastern European,' she replied with a laugh.

Roberta's words convey the multifaceted weaving of whiteness and desirability on the erotic and sex markets. Whiteness is, first of all, a valuable good: male customers (currently)⁴¹ prefer to be serviced by a white woman and, hence, brothel owners primarily employ white women. Roberta's description of her colleagues confirmed this point; a point consistent with scholarship on the US and Canadian erotic and sex markets, which confirms the lower and cheaper market positioning of black women vis-à-vis their white colleagues.⁴² In turn, such racialised and gendered employability patterns are partly related to the Western colonial imagining of black women as naturally endowed with excessive sexuality (Magubane 2011; Lyons & Lyons 2011). In the Italian case, this might constitute a legacy of the racialised hierarchies of desirability enforced throughout Italian imperialism, discussed earlier in this chapter.

Yet, as Roberta's words convey, there are different shades of whiteness, and in this case Roberta considers her Italian nationality to be a disadvantage, as it

⁴¹ For example, Janine Dahinden reports that Swiss 'nightclub owners mentioned a specific demand for women from Eastern Europe because they are well-educated, tall, and blonde. Prior to this, it was Latin Americans and Thais who were in demand' (2010: 336).

⁴² See for example: Koken et al. (2010: 228) on escorting; Brooks (2010) and Law (2012: 141) on strip clubs; Miller-Young (2010: 220) on the porn industry.

diminishes her desirability in her male compatriot customers' eyes. Accordingly, she manipulates race to maximise her earnings, as similarly foregrounded by other scholars.⁴³

More precisely, Roberta tries to enhance what I defined as (her) 'exotic value' – i.e. the translation in economic terms of gendered, class-based and racialised desire and despise affecting power relations between (erotic and sex) workers and their customers. This notion relies on Anne McClintock's (1995) analysis of Western male travellers and colonisers' racialised stereotyping of women and men living in the Americas, Africa, and Asia as primitively hypersexual and exotic; and the lands they inhabited as 'a porno-tropics [...] onto which Europe projected its forbidden sexual desires and fears' (1995: 22). In her analysis of the US stripping industry, Siobhan Brooks uses the term 'racialized erotic capital' to refer to the possession of what 'is considered desirable by dominant standards of beauty within the United States, which often includes someone who is White, young, and/or has a lean body' (2010: 7). Exotic value however has a broader meaning, as it encompasses not only what is positively valued (i.e. a capital, an asset) but also what is despised (i.e. backwardness, primitiveness), and acknowledges whiteness as a category internally fractured along racialised lines.

The validity of this concept also holds in relation to other scholars' analysis of the fragmented value of whiteness on the erotic and sex markets. For example, Law argued that white Western male customers prefer 'exotic' but 'familiar' (i.e. white) women; a suggestion also posited by Megan Rivers-Moore, who

⁴³ For example, Tullia Law, a white Finnish woman who worked as a stripper in Canada throughout her higher education, reported that she also 'engage[d] in this practice [...] by (over)-emphasizing my Finnish heritage at work' (2012: 143). Also, during an interview with Wendy Chapkis, Cheyenne – a black American sex worker – said:

'Over the phone, I describe myself as half Native American and half Black. That way I appeal to the guys who want something 'exotic' but want it packaged more like the girl next door. When I just say I'm Black, I get skipped over again and again. Look, I'm not saying I want it to be this way, I'm just telling you what I've had to learn about packaging myself for this market' (quot. in Chapkis, 1997: 105; see also Egan, 2006: 108).

During Sexgate, media reported that some women turned older male leaders' racialised desire on itself, consciously using it as an economic asset. For example, Maria Makdoun reportedly accepted to participate in Arcore nights by stating:

'since I have Arab nationality, I replied that I can dance belly dance' (quot. in RQuotidiano, 2011).

researched North American men's sex tourism in Costa Rica (2013). Law also suggested that the 'archetype of the Romanian Stripper' embodies the perfect combination of distance, familiarity and exoticism (2012: 139-140); it is this specific assemblage of white exoticism that Roberta performs as she disguises her nationality in front of her male compatriots. At the same time, this 'top woman' embodies the feminine abject of respectable Italian women, as discussed in the previous section. Desirability, therefore, seems to be ambivalently, intrinsically constituted by varying mixtures of despise.

Exotic value, hence, is rooted in and reproduces a racialised and sexualised temporality, ranging: from black women's primitive promiscuity, which attracts Western men's fascination and despise (Magubane 2001; Nagel 2003); to white prostitutes in the metropolises, who were conceived as 'white negroes' (McClintock 1995: 56); to the white, chaste and asexual Western women, the apex of modernity (Lyons & Lyons 2011). As I show, some women erotic workers expressed how male customers, indeed, treated foreign women as if they hailed from an anachronistic space. They were more intensely desirable in men's eyes, also due to men's implicit assumption that foreign women were naïve, inexperienced, vulnerable, and/or pliable, which magnified men's gendered power in turn.

Mirca, a white Italian woman, started working in erotic entertainment at a table dancing club in Australia. Below, she describes how part of her higher exotic value stemmed from male customers' assumption that she was more naïve than her native (i.e. Australian) colleagues and, therefore, more likely to (be induced to) transgress the space- and time-boundedness of their work-bound encounter:

In Australia, I was 'the foreigner'; in fact, girls there hated me because, even if I didn't do or say anything special, customers used to give me so much money! And now, after having worked for so long in Italy, I understand... What the fuck! (h) A man who views you as fresher assumes that you're naïve and that you don't know how it works; in fact, many asked me to go out with them, but I never did. I remember a guy once told me: 'don't you ever change' (h). Because after a while girls start lying in order to work, but I was who I was; and now I realise what he meant...

Male customers' racialised imaginary of Mirca as an exotic woman – i.e. naïve, pliable, and inexperienced – reportedly inflated her earnings. However, when she returned to Italy, Mirca shifted to the position of the native woman and had to compete with foreign women's higher desirability. Due to foreign women's exotic value in male customers' eyes, Mirca lost out.

Girls come here [Italy] as soon as they turn eighteen and go to live with older girls, who instruct them in how to behave. The Italian man maybe expects a foreigner to go [to bed] with him, so he creates his own imaginary movie. Maybe most of them are gifted houses, even if they did nothing, just because they make men fall in love (h), and a man in love can even ruin his family...

In the next section, I discuss how the racialised assumptions underlying the production and circulation of exotic value clashed in the case of Maha, an Italian woman whose darker skin colour ignites male customers' expectations of her foreignness.

Asynchronous exoticism, and the colour of the nation

Maha is a young Italian woman of Moroccan origin. At the time of our interview, she was completing her BA at a prestigious university several hours from her hometown. Her parents paid her tuition fees throughout her five years of study, but Maha had to cover all her living expenses. Akin to other young women I interviewed,⁴⁴ Maha resorted to image work in discos and trade fairs to pay for her choice to live outside the family home. At first, her earnings were limited.

Then, little by little, I started to know people who introduced me to the right milieu. Unfortunately or luckily, it's a vicious circle: you have to do anything to be spotted, but without giving off a confidence that would lead them to think that you are an escort, a whore, a loose woman so to speak. Especially because I'm foreign.

Maha's self-presentation as foreign obviously contradicts the fact that she is an Italian citizen, born in Italy, and her mother tongue is Italian, even if her mother's language is Arabic. However, I was struck by how plainly she stated that male customers hold the racialised assumption that foreign women are most likely whores. 'What?' I asked, hoping she would clarify the link, 'Do

⁴⁴ E.g. Kate, Eleonora, Demi (Chapter 3).

customers really expect foreign women to be “looser”?’ ‘Well of course! Sure!’ she exclaimed, puzzled at my surprise.

If you are foreign, they automatically think that you’re here without your parents, that you’re here to earn your living and that you earn your living in any possible way. They don’t think the reasons why you’d choose such a life – to work at night, etc. – stem from necessity; that you need to reconcile work and study, that we’re all different. I mean, some manage to study after an eight hour shift, but others would rather die! So clearly, the difficulty in this job is that I’m foreign and people don’t even believe that I can speak Italian so well.

As Mirca before, Maha describes how part of her exotic value stems from customers’ expectations that foreign women are more likely to transgress the boundaries of their space-bound encounter. Such expectation is based on foreign women’s assumed promiscuity and/or ruthless, primal survival instinct, which makes them readier to do anything in the face of economic need. Underneath Maha’s denial of her ‘Italianness’ lay a range of complex meanings, a discussion of which is beyond the scope of this dissertation; however, it is her darker skin colour that ignites men’s racialised expectation of her hypersexuality:

Look, I also went to normal interviews to work as a secretary or whatever. [...] And unfortunately, the fact that I am mulatto, objectively foreign, brings me to certain things, especially after Ruby’s scandal [Rubygate]. I am Moroccan and she is Moroccan, you can’t imagine, the end of the world! Scandal! People stopped me in Via del Corso [Corso Boulevard] and asked: ‘Ruby? Are you Ruby?!’

The uneasy accommodation of blackness in the (body of the) white Italian nation emerged strikingly when a black woman was crowned Italy’s beauty queen, igniting heated public debate (see for example: Alfonso, 1996; Bohlen, 1996) on the relationship between the nation, feminine beauty standards, and skin colour. Some commentators highlighted that blackness signalled a distant exoticism that was at odds with the nation, while others stressed that ‘Italian beauty’ was synonymous with ‘Mediterraneity’ (see reactions collected by Ardizzoni, 2005: 510; and De Luca, 1996). Historically, the definition of ‘Italian beauty’ was part of the racialised distinction between the country’s northern and southern regions, whereby women were respectively depicted as fair vs.

dark-skinned (Gundle, 2007: 33). The adoption of 'Mediterraneity' as the standard of Italian beauty occurred around the 1990s, when 'the country was fashioning a distinctive set of images with which to identify itself in the international marketplace' (*ibid.*: 239). By the end of the twentieth century, the primitive hyper-sexuality used by the ruling northern bourgeoisie to mark the otherness of Italy's southern regions returned as a profitable source of exotic value, branding 'made in Italy' products internationally.⁴⁵

Her 'Mediterranean' traits – e.g. dark skin, hair, eyes – notwithstanding, Maha is perceived as foreign; more specifically, she is mistaken for Ruby, the young woman who triggered Sexgate.⁴⁶ However, underneath her indignation at being mistaken for a woman stigmatised as a whore, there is also a trace of the pleasure encapsulated in the position of the glamorous celebrity, walking on the high street of Italy's fashion capital (i.e. Milan) and stopped by her audience. Her exotic value is, hence, a mixed blessing: it attracts job opportunities and visibility, but also a heightened experience of the whore stigma.

Monica, an Italian image girl, similarly embodied the stereotypical 'Italian Mediterranean' traits. In the following quote, she conveys her pleasure at being perceived as an exotic woman by male customers in discos:

In image work, the race mixture [sic] is much appreciated, because eventually the majority of girls who have half father from here and half from there, well, they are very beautiful: they have highly characteristic features, awesome bodies, etc. And indeed, I spent a whole summer being told [by male customers]: 'Come on, you're not Italian! You're too beautiful to be Italian. You're Brazilian!' (h). I swear! (h)

Monica, however, does not seem bothered by the underlying assumption that as an exotic woman, she is also primitively hyper-sexual. Perhaps, being Italian, she feels that she can opt-out of this racialised persona at any time. In contrast, Maha feels that this protective national/ist affect is unavailable to her because she is 'mulatto, objectively foreign'. Structurally abjectified by the White Italian

⁴⁵ For example, several advertising campaigns by Dolce & Gabbana are set in Italy's southern regions, and women models in particular are embodying the stereotypical traits of 'Mediterranean femininity' (see for example: Redazione, 2013; Tornatore, 1994).

⁴⁶ I discussed Sexgate and 'Rubygate' in Chapter 1.

nation, Maha, as Mirca before her, resorts to taming the whore stigma she experiences by questioning every woman's respectability:

'image girl' does not necessarily mean 'whore'. It also does, for God's sake, there are those who do it, but also mothers can be whores. It depends on how you look at it. It depends on how you behave.

Exotic value alone is not sufficient to determine a woman's (actual or potential) earnings on the erotic and sex markets, nor is it necessarily a positive source of revenue. Hence, after recounting how she disguises her Italian nationality in order to enhance her exotic value in the eyes of compatriot customers, Roberta stated that Italianness was a plus for women escorts. When I asked the average price for sexual services, she said it depended 'on the level you work at. If you're Italian, young and in the right milieu, you can earn up to five hundred Euros per customer.' Analogously, Mirca recalled that in Italy, 'I was paid two or up to three hundred Euros for an acrobatic strip teasing show, but most clubs paid foreign girls only twenty-five Euros per show.'

Evidently, gender, class, race, and sexuality, amidst other positionings, can assemble in multiple ways on the erotic and sex markets, although a detailed discussion of such assemblages is beyond the scope of this dissertation. In the next section, however, I highlight the role of the state, especially its prostitution laws, in positioning Italian and migrant women differently on the erotic and sex markets. Such positioning engenders power differentials in income generation potential, bargaining power vis-à-vis employers and customers, and women's social and spatial mobility. This discussion then leads me to outline the role of xenophobia and homophobia in contemporary Italy's nostalgia for regulationism.

Clean the streets, clean the nation: respectability, xenophobia and homophobia

The contemporary concentration of migrant women in street sex work is a direct consequence of the ambivalences in the Merlin Law (Repubblica Italiana 1958), which simultaneously allows the sale of sexual services everywhere and nowhere (Tatafiore, 2012: 154). The law abolished brothels and decriminalised

the act of prostitution, but it also contains a very loose formulation of the crime of aiding and abetting prostitution. According to this law, anyone but a sex worker's customer is at risk of incrimination: from the landlord who rents her a flat, to night entertainment business owners, to her husband (art. 3-4, Repubblica Italiana, 1958). Amidst these restrictions, a sex worker can legally sell sexual services only in a flat of her/his own or on public land, where the state (i.e. a third party) cannot ask for rental fees for the workspace (e.g. the pavement on which s/he stations).

During my fieldwork, I encountered no Italian women selling sexual services on the streets; the Italian women sex workers I interviewed in Italy worked autonomously in their own flats. However, migrant women are de facto precluded from this market positioning. It is fair to assume that migrant women moving for work reasons do not own a flat in the country of destination (i.e. Italy), which obviously puts them in the position of having to rent one. According to the Merlin Law, they are hence structurally positioned as *street* sex workers, because no-one can sell sexual services in a rented flat. However, the racist stereotype constructing foreign women as whores I discussed earlier in this Chapter affects their very capacity to find a room to sleep in. Landlords reportedly assume that migrant women are whores, and accordingly fear they might be charged with aiding and abetting prostitution.⁴⁷ Unless migrant women can rely on different networks for housing (e.g. friends, relatives, etc.), they are considered dangerous tenants who have to pay a higher price just to have a roof over their heads.⁴⁸ 'Sometimes I fuck the old man,' said Jenny while recounting how she occasionally has to barter sex-for-rent with the old widowed Italian man subletting a room in his house. Evidently, migrant sex workers' higher living expenses jeopardises their savings' capacity, possibilities

⁴⁷ This suggestion is based on field notes collected during my fieldwork with organizations providing outreach services to street sex workers.

⁴⁸ Migrant street sex workers who had resorted to renting a room in motels told me that prices ranged from twenty-five Euros a day for a shared double room to forty Euros for a single. In both cases, they had no breakfast included and no use of kitchen facilities, which entailed higher boarding expenses.

for improving their work conditions (e.g. working in a more profitable and/or comfortable market niche) and condemns them to work more.⁴⁹

The contemporary push for regulationism in Italy is unfolding amidst intensifying indignation for the ‘impropriety’ revealed and embodied by street sex workers, and rising xenophobia. As the Merlin Law requires, street sex workers are stationed on public soil; hence, the negotiation for sexual services is relatively visible. When brothels were shut down in 1958, the sudden visibility of Italian women sex workers led to the perception of an ‘explosion’ of prostitution (Angioletti, 1979: 41).⁵⁰ Such a widespread perception of excess and saturation re-emerged around the 1990s, as the sex market began to change rapidly with the arrival of increasing waves of M2F transgender and women migrant sex workers.

‘When I used to practice, transgender [sexual] services were the most expensive, pricier than nowadays,’ said Porpora Marcasciano, a former street sex worker and current president of Movimento Identità Transessuale (Transsexual Identity Movement, MIT).

It was the sensation of the times. It was in the 1960s-70s, in the period when not only we trans and homosexuals came out, but also desires, sex, sexuality, everything came out of censorship. People came out, others rediscovered themselves. In the 1970s and 1980s, [M2F] trans were the queens of the night, and since they were few [...] prices were very high. They had much bargaining power. Then, when South American trans arrived in mass, the whole market equilibrium collapsed. This is when struggles between natives and migrant [sex workers] first exploded,⁵¹ and this happened before the big flows of migrant women from Eastern European countries. They [trans] were avant-garde, they travelled and discovered the world!⁵² (h)

⁴⁹ In Chapter 5 I discuss the entanglement of sex, care, love and work in erotic and street sex workers’ West-ward migratory projects.

⁵⁰ The quantification of prostitution is an inherently elusive goal due to the practice’s highly diversified forms, times and spaces – e.g. full time or part time, occasionally and/or seasonally, publicly or under cover, etc. (see for example: Rossiaud (2013: 121) on prostitution in medieval Europe; and Gibson (1999: 85-86) on Italy until WWI).

⁵¹ Roberta Tatafiore similarly described the transformation in the street sex market with the arrival of migrant and M2F transgender sex workers (2012: 89-91).

⁵² When I asked Porpora how she would explain migrant transgender ‘pioneering’ role in the transformation of the sex markets in Italy, she responded:

The explosion of conflict between native and migrant street sex workers in the transgender sex market niche was also reported by women street sex workers:

In Rome and Milan, they have organised demonstrations demanding that the government impose more restrictions on foreigners and grant more freedom for themselves. Obviously we don't agree with these positions; they don't understand that their freedom is inevitably interlinked with these people's freedom. If the government represses foreigners, they will repress them as well. (Corso, 1991: 226)

As highlighted by Carla Corso, the president of Comitato, state repression spared no-one (Tatafiore, 2012: 91). A few years later, the increase in migrant women selling sex on the street ignited a similar process of transformation in the sex market and further radicalisation of state repression on street sex workers.

By the end of the 1990s, women street sex workers mainly hailed from countries of the former Soviet Union and Nigeria,⁵³ while Italian women shifted indoors in an attempt to stem the race to the bottom in terms of prices as occurred in the transgender sex market (see for example: Tatafiore, 2012: 140; Corso, 1991: 227-8). 'The arrival of these big migratory waves changed the relationship between supply and demand; the condition of the subject offering changed,' said Pia Covre about those years.

This affected the customer's awareness of his bargaining power; it increased it [his bargaining power]. Before, they had money but we were few [...] so we could impose any condition, any price. [...] With globalisation everything changed, and suddenly we had a huge supply on the market and very fluctuating prices, because [migrant] women did not know how much we asked. They asked what was a lot to them, but they did not realise that for us and for the market back then, they should and could have asked for much more!

'South American trans were escaping their repressive regimes – Brazil, Argentina, Peru – each one worse than the other! They went to Spain and France, but when AIDS arrived, France tightened [migration] controls and many moved on to Italy'.

Further research could explore to what extent transgenderism reflects their gender performativity, an opportunistic strategy in the face of the narrow and cheap labour market alternatives available to migrant men, a masquerade of femininity to comply with prevailing homophobia, and/or other options.

⁵³ Nigerian women's prostitution in Italy is generally considered as a result of trafficking for sexual exploitation (see for example: Campani, 2000: 158; Becucci, 2008: 51; Willson, 2011: 325). However as mentioned in Chapter 1, discussing trafficking is beyond the scope of my dissertation.

In the early 1990s, Italy went through a dramatic institutional crisis ignited by a judicial investigation known as *Mani Pulite* (Clean Hands),⁵⁴ out of which emerged a thinly assembled political coalition.⁵⁵ Halting (undocumented) migration⁵⁶ and pushing sex work out of sight⁵⁷ were two of the very few priorities this coalition shared. Meanwhile, media sensationalism depicted migrant women as promiscuous, exotic, or prostitutes (Merrill, 2006: 66), and more widely fostered a migration siege syndrome, which paired migration with terms such as ‘invasion’ and ‘explosion’ (Mingione & Quassoli, 2000: 41; see also: Zincone, 1998: 77).

From the 1990s onwards, ‘cleaning the nation’ became synonymous with cleaning its streets from prostitution; in the early 1990s, the return to regulationism was already becoming a topic of public debate (Tatafiore, 2012: 149). From 2007 onwards, mayors have been trying to autonomously clean the streets, imposing administrative measures on (overwhelmingly migrant) street sex workers and customers justified in the name of ‘urban safety’, which is supposedly jeopardised by public solicitation (Garofalo Geymonat, 2014: 91). Media and political sensationalism frame the country as plagued by an unstoppable migration, superseding concerns for migrant (women and men’s)

⁵⁴ This was a nationwide judicial investigation into political corruption. Historically, it constitutes the watershed moment between Italy’s first and second Republic. The *Democrazia Cristiana* (Christian Democracy Party) – the party that had continuously held the reins of power in the Italian government since the end of WWII and the birth of the Republic in 1948 – was scrupulously investigated, and many of its members were found guilty (see for example: Duggan, 2014: 292-293; Ginsborg, 2007: 501-505). The party subsequently fragmented in several minor parties (see e.g. the following footnote).

⁵⁵ The coalition was composed of: (i) *Forza Italia* (Right on, Italy!), which was founded by the self-made entrepreneur and media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi; (ii) *Lega Nord* (Northern League), a secessionist and xenophobic populist party; (iii) *Alleanza Nazionale* (National Alliance), heir of the Fascist Party (Tarchi, 2003: 142); and (iv) *Centro Cristiano Democratico* (Democratic Christian Centre), a smaller spin-off of the former Christian Democracy. This coalition ruled Italy almost continuously for nearly twenty years, from 1994 to 2011.

⁵⁶ The migration law known as ‘Bossi-Fini’ (Governo Italiano, 2002) took its name from the party leaders of the Northern League and the National Alliance, who were then the Minister of Institutional Reforms and Devolution and the Minister of Foreign Affairs respectively. The law tightened entry options for migrants, making entry dependent on their prior possession of a job, and restricted family reunification and asylum seeking procedures. Housemaids and care workers were, however, granted a general amnesty (art. 33, comma 1). In Chapter 5 I will contextualize this exceptionalism within the discussion of the narrow sex/care work binary that migrant women travelling alone are often faced with upon their entry into Italy.

⁵⁷ For example, a governmental bill proposed to criminalise the sale of sex in ‘a public place or places open to the public’ and decriminalise flat rentals for the practice prostitution (Consiglio dei Ministri, 2002).

victimhood (or even human) condition. Catalysed by populist, xenophobic and fascist parties, violent attacks on migrants, refugees, and the Roma are escalating.⁵⁸ Significantly, throughout my research I saw initiatives celebrating the glamour and splendour of the era of state-regulated brothels. One such initiative was the newly established Museo delle Case di Tolleranza (Museum of Houses of Tolerance, i.e. brothels), which houses an exhibition on the 1920s and 1930s (Fig. 4), corresponding to the apex of fascism in Italy.



Fig. 4. Houses of Tolerance, exhibition.
Exhibition - years 1920s-30s.
Romano d'Ezzelino April 25 and 26

Scholars researching sex work in contemporary Europe from a migration, labour and/or citizenship angle have argued that the abolitionist position, which interlinks sex trafficking and prostitution, tends to overlap with anti-migration and/or xenophobic agendas. As Laura Agustín stated, ‘unfortunately efforts to prevent “trafficking” often try to prevent migration itself’ (2007: 40). Giulia Garofalo Geymonat further elucidates this line: ‘this strand of contemporary feminism often ties into (if not contributes to) certain discourses on migration that – in increasingly racist and Islamophobic ways – establish second-class citizenship for migrants’ (2010: 231). Furthermore, Rutvika Andrijasevic posits that ‘anti-trafficking campaigns [...] appear as measures by means of which the regulation of migration is extended beyond the state borders and into the new control fronts’ that thrive on stereotyped imageries of women as victims and men as criminals (2010: 131).

⁵⁸ For example, violent clashes erupted in different parts of Italy as citizens, supported by parties of the extreme right, protested against the hosting of migrants and refugees in neighbouring public buildings (D’Albergo & Forgnone, 2015). The virulence of racism in contemporary Italy is further epitomised by attacks on the country’s first black minister, Ms. Cécile Kyenge, who was ‘compared to an orang-utan by a former government minister; likened to a prostitute by a deputy mayor; and had bananas thrown at her while making a speech’ (Mengiste, 2013).

In contemporary Italy, however, mainstream public discourse does not frame (migrant) women sex workers mainly as victims, but as sexually and/or economically immoral women – i.e. whores. Contextually, it is regulationism, not the Swedish model, which mainstream political forces herald. Revealingly, while most Western European countries have been discussing the adoption of the Swedish model in recent years, Italy has maintained a remarkably low profile in this debate. For example, when the Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality of the European Union voted on the 'Honeyball Report' proposing its EU-level endorsement (Honeyball 2014), none of the Italian MPs participated (Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality 2014). Meanwhile, at the national level, regulationism is being intensely debated: in the current legislature (February 2013 – present), fifteen reform bills have been put to the parliament; only two these bills propose the adoption of the Swedish model, and they are sponsored by minor parties (OpenPolis, 2015). Currently, the bill supported by an across-the-board political consensus demands that sex workers comply with compulsory registration, psychological examination and taxation; it also outlines sex workers' capacity to run self-managed brothels and red light districts (Spillabotte, 2013). Meanwhile, the fiscal police have been knocking on sex workers' doors to ask them to pay taxes on their income (see for example: Gigolò, 2015; Ansa, 2015), effectively by-passing the Merlin Law's prohibition on third party profits from prostitution. The Committee for Prostitutes' Civil Rights recently held a press conference to present their bill on sex work regulation, which lays forth rights and obligations for sex workers (Ansa, 2015), although it has yet to be put to parliament.

Following from my analysis of the special relation between Italian nationalism and the ideology of respectability, I suggest that Italy's preference for a return to regulationism amidst other Western European states' consensus on the Swedish model is in part catalysed by widespread and rising xenophobia, and by homophobia. In particular, I argue that it is the concentration of migrant women and M2F sex workers in the most visible sex market niche – i.e. street sex work – that contributes to exacerbating a nationalist drive to push them indoors, out of sight.

Within a national scenario characterised by a push to clean the streets to clean the nation, the functionality of regulationism is self-evident. Under direct state-surveillance, brothels could in fact return to their original function of containing and concealing social pollution. However, this function would also be complemented by a set of other functions. One such function is the creation of a specialised unit to contain specific groups of migrants, which are ambivalently desired and despised by the nation-state. Like in any other labour market sector, the presence of a cheaper and more vulnerable workforce contributes to maintaining low labour prices and, as shown earlier, customers have benefited from the increased number of sexual service providers. Contextually, the containment of (migrant) sex workers in brothels would make the streets more respectable, as such would erase the 'improper' bodies of migrant women and M2F sex workers. It would also thin out centres where undocumented migrants are currently detained in dire living conditions (see for example: Povoledo, 2013; Squires, 2009).⁵⁹ Last but certainly not least, the moral rebranding of brothels as economic enterprises would pave the way for nationalising a part of sex market revenues, instituting highly profitable fiscal regimes for a heavily indebted state (Guano 2010: 472).

In proposing this interpretation of the political economy of regulationism in contemporary Italy, I am not taking a position against the return of regulationism. Instead, I am suggesting that the mainstream discourse arguing its necessity is rooted in agendas other than ensuring sex workers' work and human rights. Arguably, the most invisible of these agendas is that of the Catholic Church – a suggestion that points to the functionality of regulationism for heteronormativity, and that I explore in the next and concluding section of this Chapter.

⁵⁹ Centro di Identificazione ed Espulsione (Centre for Identification and Expulsion, CIE) is a place where undocumented migrants are detained while awaiting deportation. They were first established by the 1998 migration law (Repubblica Italiana 1998).

A traffic in men? Homophobia, regulationism and the Catholic Church

In searching for the roots of the sex/gender/desire system we now define heteronormative, anthropologist Gayle Rubin analysed the striking overlap between Lévi-Strauss's theories of kinship and psychoanalytic accounts of the Oedipal complex (1975). Following from Marcel Mauss analysis of gift-giving practices (1966), Lévi-Strauss theorised marriages as a 'most basic form of gift exchange in which it is women who are the most precious of gifts': their circulation among different (yet similarly men-headed) social groups results in the establishment of exogamic kinship that simultaneously establishes reciprocity and fends off the incest taboo (Rubin 1975: 173). Similarly, the Oedipal complex institutes heterosexuality and represses the child desire for the same-sex parent (*ibid.*: 193-194). 'Compulsory heterosexuality' is hence produced and enforced at both the social and psychic level; Rubin suggested that behind this shared response to the incest taboo lay 'a prior, less articulate taboo on homosexuality' (*ibid.*: 180). Judith Butler elaborated this suggestion further:

Although Freud does not explicitly argue in its favour, it would appear that the taboo against homosexuality must precede the heterosexual incest taboo; the taboo against homosexuality in effect creates the heterosexual 'dispositions' by which the Oedipal conflict becomes possible. (1990: 87)

Consistent with the view that the taboo of homosexuality is at the root of both the social system in which we live and our subjectification, I propose to look at women prostitutes not only as objects exchanged amongst men, but as women entrusted with the task of cultivating male heterosexuality and, thereby, containing the 'threat' of homosexuality. Indeed, Jacques Rossiaud reported that during the late Middle Ages in continental Europe there was a degree of osmosis rather than a neat juxtaposition between marriage and prostitution,⁶⁰ and prostitutes frequently attended marriages and received gifts (money, food, etc.)

⁶⁰ As I will highlight in Chapter 5, the Controriforma (Counter-Reformation) inaugurated by the Council of Trent (1545-1563) established a neat binary juxtaposing marriage and prostitution,

in exchange for the freedom they concede to an old customer. Sometimes it is the bride paying this symbolic price of separation [...] which accordingly ensures the tranquillity of her groom. Everyone wants to believe that the novel groom won't be bothered by his old 'mates'. This ritual exchange materialises the power that prostitutes intend to exercise over young men [...] and represents a bond between the prostitutes and the brides, between the grey world of freedom and that of the immaculate conjugality. (2013: 255)

Rossiaud explained this gift as a symbolic ransom paid by a bride to a woman prostitute, compensating the latter for her loss of a male customer who is moving on to the next life stage – i.e. marriage and reproduction. However, this gift could also be a symbolic acknowledgement of the work that women prostitutes do to cultivate men's heterosexual orientation before marriage – the threshold wherein reproduction is socially legitimated and valued. If this suggestion is viable, it would entail looking at a 'traffic in men', wherein men circulate among women entrusted with the task of either cultivating their heterosexual orientation (i.e. whores) or reproducing their offspring (i.e. wives and mothers). Such proposition is not an attempt to reverse power relations between men and women (e.g. suggesting that women are 'in charge' of men), but to suggest reading women's prostitution as a task that contributes to ensure 'reproduction and generationality' (Berlant 1997: 56).

This tentative suggestion requires further research. Nonetheless, it still enables the conceptualisation of the brothel as a place for not only 'tolerating' men's excessive sexual drive, but also cultivating it in the first place, ensuring men's proper (and respectable) heterosexual desire. In turn, this suggestion demands an interrogation of contemporary Italy's nostalgia for regulationism at a level deeper than xenophobia (Mengiste 2013; Popham 2013) or fiscal deficit (Joels 2015). More precisely, it forces one to question the role of the Catholic Church in producing and/or enabling Italy's peculiar longing for the lost brothel.

Italy, in fact, is not only the cradle and host of the Roman Catholic Church, it is also the only Western European country that does not recognise any form of same-sex union (see for example: (Lipka 2015; Crispian 2015). Notwithstanding

thereby assimilating any non- or extra-marital sexual relation (fornication, adultery, concubinage) to prostitution (Ferrante 1998: 140-141; Ferrante 1987: 1014).

the tense relations between the nation-state and the Vatican, including in matters of divorce (Pollard, 2008: 35-36), the prostitution of women has never represented a site of conflict between these two entities. During the ten year parliamentary debate that led to the Merlin Law, the Vatican never expressed any official position (Tatafiore, 2012: 176; see also Bellassai, 2006: 156-8; and Garofalo, 1956: 93). Today, as the Church increasingly interferes in domestic debates on sexual education and disseminates 'panic' around the encroaching 'ideology of gender',⁶¹ it remains silent in the debate on the regulation of prostitution/sex work.

Catholicism's tactical support for regulationism is rooted in a theological shift that occurred around the twelfth century, which inaugurated a more relaxed, but naturalised, approach to sexuality. Sex was disconnected from the original sin and death, and reframed as both natural and necessary within the bounds of heterosexuality and monogamous, reproductive marriage (Rossiaud, 2013: 31-32; see also Hirshman & Larson, 1998: 45-47). In parallel emerged the figure of the *meretrix publica* (public harlot) as a professional category of women workers (Rossiaud, 2013: 7). By the end of the thirteenth century, the Church's official position was that prostitution was 'the lesser of two evils'; the worse evils being homosexuality, adultery, and incest (*ibid.*: 12).⁶² Most European kingdoms and city-states, including the Papal State, enforced early versions of regulationism (Rossiaud, 2013: 102; Ferrante, 1987; Zaffanella, 2008).⁶³

Despite the Catholic Church's horror for homosexuality, in Italy it was never explicitly criminalised as sexual deviance.⁶⁴ By the end of the nineteenth

⁶¹ In Chapter 1, I described contemporary Italy's panic for the diffusion of the 'ideology of gender'.

⁶² The principle was enshrined in the 'De Regimine Principum' written by the Dominican friar Thomas Aquinas and concluded around 1280 by Tolomeo di Lucca (Rossiaud, 2013: 12).

⁶³ For centuries before the establishment of the Kingdom of Italy, the central regions of the peninsula were united under the Papal state: a theocracy where the Pope embodied the highest temporal and spiritual authority.

⁶⁴ Giovanni Dall'Orto analyses the shift from the different legal punishments of homosexuality enforced in the pre-unity political entities, to its decriminalisation in the first national Penal Code ('Zanardelli' Code) in 1889, provided that homosexual acts were consensual and 'consumed' in private settings (1988). Homosexuality was briefly denoted as a political crime against the Italian race (Stefani, 2007: 127) during fascist imperialism, which prescribed the confinement of homosexuals together with midwives practicing abortion and antifascists (Willson, 2011: 116-118). However, this denotation was short-lived; by 1940, all the confined

century England and Germany (i.e. Protestant countries) hastened the criminalisation of homosexuality (Mosse, 1996: 98); Italy, on the other hand attracted a sexuality-driven flow of migrants (Colombo & Sciortino, 2004: 52-53).

I argue that the explanation for these different approaches lies in how states and religious authorities divided their reciprocal tasks in the shared objective of containing homosexuality. In turn, this calls into question doctrinal differences established during and in the aftermath of the Protestant Reformation. Luther in fact cancelled the sacrament of priest-intermediated confession (McCain et al. 2007); hence any transgression of (respectability-borne) morality was immediately public and directly sanctioned by the state. On the other hand the Council of Trent, that inaugurated the Counter-Reformation of the Catholic Church, strengthened believers' compulsory private confession, during which priests could mould believers' sexuality discretely, if case need be (see for example: Foucault, 1990: 21; Hirshman & Larson, 1998: 51). Hence, Catholic priests contributed to the spatial containment of immorality, and the state was left to intervene only as a last resort if improper (e.g. homosexual) behaviours became publicly visible. The legal discipline of homosexuality was hence unnecessary or even undesirable, as such implied the very recognition of its existence. Such was the case of Italy (see for example: Willson, 2011: 7; Dall'Orto, 1988).

The Italian state's abdication of the power to discipline sexual morality in favour of the Catholic Church contributes to explain why Italy does not have a law recognising same-sex unions yet, and why it nostalgically longs to return to state regulated prostitution amidst an EU consensus on the Swedish model.

Meanwhile, homophobia also however indirectly contributes to maintaining the ongoing debates on the regulation of prostitution/sex work within a neat gender binary, wherein women are the victims and men the perpetrators of

were sent back home and confinement of homosexuals was no longer practiced (Dall'Orto, 1988).

violence.⁶⁵ When a man sells sex to other men, his 'masculinity [is] called into question' (Minichiello et al., 2012: 264); according to Porpora Marcasciano, homophobia contributes to why men selling sex on the street continue to be invisible in public debates on prostitution/sex work. Porpora referred to this phenomenon when describing her work with the mobile street unit:

For example, you cannot send a woman operator to contact a male street sex worker because the relationship gets totally warped [...] because something like handing him a condom is like a statement that you're seeing him there, that he's prostituting himself, that he's selling sex to other men. [...] So, on one side, men offer sexual services but they feel guilty, and the relationship [with customers] frequently turns violent. Like [Pier Paolo] Pasolini said,⁶⁶ in our cultural system a man selling homosexual services feels the need to stress that 'it is not true' [that I am engaging in homosexual sex acts].

However, public discourse on the regulation of prostitution/sex work remains focused on women selling sex to men only. This framing of the debate reflects the radical feminist position on the violence intrinsic to prostitution, as they argue that such is a gendered activity reliant on the re-production of a dichotomy juxtaposing women as victims and men as their oppressors (MacKinnon 2011; Pateman 1988). This position, however, disregards evidence of the increasing diversification of providers of erotic and sexual services (see for example: Sagar et al. 2015: 35; Minichiello et al., 2012: 270; Koken et al. 2010; Phoenix 2009; Sanders et al. 2009: 76), and women's emerging consumption patterns of erotic and sexual services sold by both men (Gigolò 2015b) and women (Goldhill 2015). In so doing, this position continues to reflect the prioritisation of gender over other axes of inequality in analysing (not only) women's agency in sex work, hence reproducing the racialised privileging of white Western women.

Conclusions

In this chapter, I discussed the racialised and sexualised inflections of respectability, desire and despise, which underlie the contemporary segmentation of the pleasure, erotic and sex markets, and Italy's standalone

⁶⁵ Such is the position of radical feminists and abolitionists, that I will describe in Chapter 5.

⁶⁶ Pier Paolo Pasolini was a leading Italian intellectual known for his left wing sympathies and his outspoken homosexuality. He was murdered in 1975 in unclear circumstances.

position (amongst Western EU states) in favour of a return to regulationism and in opposition to the recognition of same-sex unions.

Firstly, I argued that Italian nationalism has a special, affective relationship with regulationism, which began with the birth of the nation itself, lasted for a century, and periodically resurfaces as nostalgia for the 'lost brothel'. Against this backdrop, I interpreted Italian women's racialisation of respectability partly as a legacy of the Italian state's century-long policing of women's sexuality, and partly as a reflection of contemporary xenophobia and homophobia. In fact, the most visible sex workers (i.e. street-based) are migrant women and M2F transgender. In this context, popular demands to 'clean the streets' and reopen brothels have become coterminous with making the nation 'respectable' again. In turn, this led to an interrogation of the sexualised assumptions underlying respectability, eventually unravelling the meaning of the Catholic Church's steadfast position of not objecting to regulationism (Tatafiore 2012: 176; Bellassai 2006: 156-8; Garofalo 1956: 93). I suggested that, for the Catholic Church, the prostitution of women also constitutes a tool to cultivate men's heterosexual orientation and safeguard heteronormativity. Hence, I argued that Italy's standalone position for a return to regulationism and against same sex unions partially mirrors the homophobia of the Catholic Church and its persisting influence on the country's legal disciplining of sexuality.

Secondly, I interrogated the meanings underlying the racialised segmentation of the pleasure, erotic and sex markets I observed, and the significance of the internal fragmentation of whiteness. I suggested to read Italian pole dance entrepreneurs and teachers' discursive purification of their practice, distancing it from lap dancers and migrant women, as an indicator of a process of whitestreaming akin to those underwent by many sensual dances throughout the twentieth century (Hanna 2010: 226). Subsequently, I elaborated the concept of 'exotic value' to describe different, race-inflected assemblages of desirability and despise that reproduce colonial and imperial-borne hierarchies of value among women. I interpreted the prevalence of white women erotic and sex workers in the niches I observed (night clubs, street sex work) as an

indicator of Italian men's deeply racialised desire for whiteness, which was actively cultivated during Italian imperialism through racial laws and policies criminalising Italian male settlers' sexual contact with native black women (Goglia & Grassi 1993: 281; Sbacchi 1985: 190).

In this chapter, I concluded my analysis of the gendered, sexualised, class-based and racialised othering processes underlying Italian women's articulation of their position as respectable feminine subjects. In Chapter 5, I turn to the tensions characterising women's heteronormative subjectification, as articulated by women abjectified by respectability, i.e. Italian and migrant erotic and sex workers.

**Chapter 5. Blurring the borders between
work, the market and intimacy: pleasure
and pain in erotic and sex work**

Lina is an Italian woman who started working as a lap dancer more than ten years ago, when she moved from her hometown to Milan to study music at the conservatory. 'Initially I studied during the day and worked at night as a barmaid and waitress,' she recalled.

Then, I met the man who would become my manager for a while. He told me: 'You're a beautiful girl. If you want, you can make much more money than you do here.' And so he introduced me to this world; a world I had only seen on TV until then. I tried it, and when I started to see this job's positive side – [high] earnings – which is why everyone does it, I stayed on.

After graduation and a brief experience teaching at a school, Lina began giving private piano lessons in her home. 'Meanwhile, I started to come here on weekends,' she said, nodding at the club's entrance behind her. 'But, even so, I earned so much money that I thought, "you know what? I'll try to buy a flat!"' Lina shrugged her shoulders, as if her beauty was a chest of gold she happened to stumble upon. 'So I was a piano teacher during the day and I came here at night to pay my bank loan,' she said, stressing the sacrifices she made to buy a flat on her own. It should be noted that property ownership is elusive to most, especially young people, whose job insecurity excludes them from affordable bank loans. 'How old are you?' I asked, trying to gauge her entrepreneurship. 'Thirty-five,' she gloated; the same age as me, I thought. 'And did you finish paying off the loan already?' I asked incredulously. 'Oh yes! And now I'm buying another one!' she said, bursting into laughter. 'Wow! That's loads of money then!' I exclaimed, feeling somewhat overwhelmed by her accumulation of real estate. Possibly sensing an unintentional disapproval in my words, I saw Lina's facial expression turn suddenly. 'Unfortunately this is not a normal job,' she said disconsolately, 'It's not easy to have a private life. I speak for myself, and I'm Italian, but it's difficult to find a boyfriend who allows you to be like this in front of strangers.'¹ With this comment, she showed me the black latex bar and culottes she was wearing. 'But, as with many other things, how you make them

¹ In Chapter 4, I discussed the racialised temporality underlying the concept of exotic value. For Lina, her nationality is similarly associated with modernity via sexuality, whereby she assumes that Italians, and Western people more broadly, are more open-minded and enjoy higher levels of sexual freedom than non-Western people. Other scholars discussed processes of Western women's self-construction as modern subjects through the depiction of other women as 'culturally backward' (Yeğenoğlu 1998: 107; Mohanty 1988).

[money] should matter, shouldn't it? There are people who work with the mind and people who work with the body.' She crossed her arms over her curvaceous breasts and continued austere, 'here we don't work with our body. The fundamental thing is surely our image; but to concede the body is something else.'

'Tell me one thing you like and one thing you don't in this job,' I asked conclusively, mindful that the time she was gifting me literally was money.² 'The good thing is the economic side. And the bad side?' she asked herself, pausing for a moment to think, 'there isn't one, really. It's like any other service job, isn't it? You are in contact with people.' She shrugged her shoulders and continued:

Some [customers] come to have fun once in a while, and others come more frequently because they're alone all day long and need company. You often become a kind of psychologist more than a dancer. So you try to entertain him vividly with a dance break, and also stay close to him, giving him some comfort.

Heavily made up and with dark bags under her eyes, I thought Lina looked older than her age, or at least very tired for being just at the start of her work shift. 'But don't you end up taking a bit of this sadness home?' I asked. 'Nooooo! Noooo! Not at all!' she exclaimed vehemently. She took a step back from me and continued, 'as soon as I'm out of here I'm no longer interested in that! Any psychologist or doctor does the same.' 'Yes,' I said, 'but they're trained for that. Sometimes it is truly hard to get rid of work-borne stress.' 'Well if someone's sick, he should go to the hospital. If he comes here, all I can say is "Hey, you did the right thing, look at my two boobs and get over it!"' she sneered. 'Just joking, you know...' she added immediately, pulling herself back together.

As Lina's zigzagging between contradictory subject positions indicates, describing her job to an external audience entails the simultaneous managing of multiple facets of the stigma associated with women selling erotic and sexual services to men, notably promiscuity and greediness. To ward off these stigmas,

² In Chapter 1, I described the trade-off between the time of the interview and lap dancers' earnings (section: 'Ethics').

Lina articulated multiple metaphors of separation between her body and its labour power (i.e. 'image'), her authentic self and her work persona, and passed the stigma on to women who 'concede the body' – i.e. women selling 'sex acts'.³ Arguably, the forcefulness of the stigma Lina faces compels her to present her work as something she has to detach from spatially and/or emotionally, and whose exceptional earnings have to be tamed by stressing, *inter alia*, that they come from sacrifice – i.e. the lack of love. In so doing, however, she loses the possibility to claim her work as a source of pleasurable feelings for herself, such as confidence in her valuable beauty, and pride in her economic self-reliance.

The objective of this chapter is to explore the tensions characterising women's heteronormative subjectification, as articulated by women whose job entails taking up the position of the whore, amidst an ambivalent aura of desirability and despise, fun and psychological burden, pleasure and pain. I begin with a review of the sociological and feminist scholarship discussing affect, work, and embodiment. In particular, I concentrate on the paradigm clash around overcoming the Cartesian mind/body dualism, which bears ontological significance within the feminist sex wars' debate on prostitution/sex work. I focus specifically on the debate around workers' capacity to articulate the boundaries separating themselves from their work and labour, and the underlying meanings, juxtaposing the paradigm of alienation with embodiment and connectedness. I argue that alienation is not intrinsic to erotic and sex work; instead, Italian and migrant women workers' articulation of the separation between their bodies and themselves, their work and their intimate sphere, represents a tactic for resisting the multifaceted, intersecting stigmas they experience at and due to their work.

³ Sex workers' job entails use of a range of body parts and/or orifices to produce customers' sexual satisfaction through direct body touch (hereafter referred to as 'sex acts'), which sets them apart from erotic workers (e.g. lap dancers, telephone sex operators), who instead typically prompt it indirectly (e.g. visually, virtually). This definition, which I elaborated for the purpose of this dissertation, crucially relies on the concept of 'body work', i.e. a form of 'employment that takes the body as its immediate site of labour, involving intimate, messy contact with the (frequently supine or naked) body, its orifices or products through touch or close proximity' (Wolkowitz, 2006).

Next, I take issue with the cultural construction of the neat separation between market and intimacy, which is at the core of stigmas surrounding prostitution, highlighting the underlying class biases. To this end, I discuss Italian and migrant women's engagement in erotic and sex work within the broader sphere of their personal aspirations, encompassing their affective bonds to beloved dependents, within a context characterised by economic precarity and racialised, gendered employability patterns (Brah 1993a; 1993b). In conclusion, I use my own experience as a white Western aid worker to interrogate the ordinary alienation embedded in 'respectable' jobs, questioning the class and racialised biases embedded in the construction of hierarchies of acceptable degrees and types of work-induced pain.

Affect and work: alienation or connectedness?

In recent years, a growing body of scholarship has emerged on affect, a 'realm of feeling that is not self-contained and separate but rather enhanced and produced through the relations between the self and other' (Blackman, 2008: 52). A central tenet of this scholarship is overcoming the Cartesian mind/body dualism, and instead acknowledging subjectivities as embodied. A body is not an object controlled by the mind, as embodiment is our 'way of being in and experiencing the world' (see for example: Wolkowitz, 2006: 22; Blackman, 2008: 34) and 'thought is itself [...] embodied' (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010: 2-3). Moreover, in contrast to the liberal view of the individual as autonomous and detached,⁴ scholarship on affect places relationality and connectedness at its core: 'affect arises in the midst of *in-between-ness*: in the capacities to act and be acted upon' (*ibid.*: 1).

Western feminist scholars have long criticised the Cartesian mind/body dualism, which they consider to underlie the social construction of women's natural subordination to men through the association of men with the mind, will and cognition and women with the body, emotion and irrationality (see for example: Bordo, 1993: 4-5; Seidler, 1987: 82). Such scholars have also long

⁴ In Chapter 2, I discussed such liberal biases in relation to the paradigm of internalized oppression, and ensuing scholarship on sexualisation and women's subjectivity and agency.

criticised the male liberal notion of the self that underlies Western epistemology, decrying this notion as reliant on an incongruous perception of human beings as free from emotions and ties that distract them from the pursuit of objective and universally valid knowledge (Haraway 1989). Accordingly, the epistemological turn to embodiment and affect represents a positive achievement, as overcoming mind/body and self/other binaries entails weakening the gender polarity they contribute to reproducing.

In sociological literature on work and employment, however, the abandonment of these dualisms is not considered as equally promising. Here, these dualisms are theorised as the blueprint for capitalist appropriation of workers' labour power, but also as a metaphor that workers use to articulate their resistance:⁵

The longstanding model of the labour market that dominates economic and managerial thinking treats capacity to work as effort that can be exchanged for a salary or wage, and many people find that they can only defend themselves against assaults on the self by deploying dualistic conceptions in their own defence. (Wolkowitz, 2006: 25)

This paradigm clash bears ontological importance for feminist scholarship on prostitution/sex work, as it entails defining the properties of what is exchanged for money on the erotic and sex markets. Is it the embodied self which gets to be sold, and therein becomes, an object? Or, is it a contracted, time- and space-bounded amount of erotic/sex workers' labour power, which does not jeopardise their subject status? Both questions are however rooted in the Marxist concept of alienation. According to Marx, labour is 'the most characteristic human life activity'; therefore, when workers sell it for a wage, they alienate from what makes them human, handing control over themselves to another person (i.e. their employer) (Bartky, 1990: 32-34). Accordingly, employment contracts of any sort represent 'a distinctively modern form of subordination' (Pateman, 2002: 33), and the possibility of separating labour from the 'self, person and body of the worker' is criticised as the central 'political fiction' of capitalism (Pateman, 1988: 202).

⁵ For example, some corporate management strategies increasingly demand workers be 'at one with the system' (Kantor & Streitfeld, 2015; see also: Wolkowitz, 2006: 26).

The radical feminist and abolitionist position on prostitution/sex work uses the Marxist concept of alienation within a strictly heteronormative framework. Prostitution is theorised as a gendered activity premised on, and reproducing, a neat binary positing men as oppressors and women as their victims.⁶ Since biological sex is what makes a woman,⁷ prostitutes' alienation is conceived as uniquely de-humanising, as it entails alienating what makes them a 'woman' in the first place, i.e. their sexed body (Pateman, 1988: 207).

On the opposite side, sex worker activists and allies turn the capitalist fiction of workers' detachable labour power into a metaphor to resist alienation and claim their subject and human status. Hence, they stress erotic and sex workers' capacity to draw and maintain a range of boundaries, separating themselves from the services they exchange for money (Chapkis, 1997: 77; Day, 2007: 43). As I show throughout this chapter, erotic and sex workers' boundary-making is complex and multi-faceted: it can entail tracing borders in space (e.g. separating work/home), in time (e.g. establishing a periodic alternation of time on/off work), and on the body (e.g. defining body parts involved in and/or sex acts performed through the service provision). It can also entail feeling different ways while performing the same act with a customer or an intimate; a possibility that is discounted a priori when assumptions are made about the universal meaning of human actions.⁸

However, the argument on boundary-drawing and maintenance in prostitution/sex work can be turned on itself. For Catharine MacKinnon, 'the abuse that is constant in prostitution, indeed endemic to it, requires dissociation from yourself and the world to survive' (2011: 288). Analogously, feminist

⁶ In Chapter 3 I discussed the work of feminist political theorist Carole Pateman (1988) which constitutes the core of abolitionists' position on prostitution/sex work. Catharine MacKinnon acknowledges that also 'boys and men are trafficked'; however, she adds that 'many of [them] are prostituting as women, some as transgendered' (MacKinnon 2011: 292), and 'so far as is known, their johns remain almost exclusively men' (*ibid.*: 293). The gender binary juxtaposing men as buyers and women as sellers is hence reconfirmed. For MacKinnon, to be a man entails 'the privilege not to have being bought and sold for sex defined as your destiny; to have it recognized that something went wrong for you, rather than saying something about you that defines your character and worth' (*ibid.*: 293).

⁷ For Pateman to be a woman entails having a special relation with the body in virtue of its capacity to reproduce human life (*ibid.*: 216).

⁸ I discuss this conundrum later in the chapter, specifically in relation to the act of 'kissing'.

political theorist Anne Phillips argued that prostitutes' level of detaching 'the body from the emotions, or the body from what we think of as the self' is exceptionally straining (2013: 150). Drawing a parallel with commercial surrogacy, she argues that the emotional management required of workers undertaking such intimate, bodily practices, amounts to a form of coercion: 'The point about both prostitution and commercial surrogacy is that you have no choice. You have to manage your emotions if you are to survive emotionally intact' (*ibid.*: 152).

Phillips' emphasis on the management of emotions draws from the sociological work of Arlie Hochschild. Hochschild formulated the seminal concept of 'emotional labour' through observing how part of flight hostesses' job and wage entails working on their emotions (e.g. smiling, concealing irritation), and warned that they risked alienation 'from an aspect of self – either the body or the margins of the soul – that is used to do the work' (2003: 7). She theorised the possibility of workers' resistance to market encroachment in degrees of depth: while their 'surface acting' entails a superficial, time- and space-bounded performance, 'deep acting' requires, and hence ignites, the modification of their 'authentic self' (*ibid.*: 33).

The concept of emotional labour has been highly influential (Grandey et al. 2013) and contributed greatly to Micheal Hardt's seminal work on 'affective labour' (1999). Hardt's point of departure is the assumption that affectivity shifted from being 'an autonomous circuit for the constitutions of subjectivity, alternative to the processes of capitalist valorisation', to one of capitalism's 'highest value-producing forms of labour' (*ibid.*: 89-90). Recently, Hochschild analysed the increasingly diversified range of professions for managing our 'emotional lives' (e.g. love coach, wedding planner), arguing that their proliferation mirrors a parallel, and complementary abdication in self-ownership:

Attached to each practical step of dating, wedding, and divorcing are the subtle issues of what, how much, and when to feel. The proliferation of such intimate services suggests that the market has made inroads into our very understanding of the self. (2012: 11-12)

The works of both Hochschild and Hardt assume and reproduce what sociologist Viviana Zelizer defined as the 'twin ideas of "separate spheres and hostile worlds": distinct arenas for economic activity and intimate relations, with inevitable contamination and disorder resulting when the two spheres come into contact with each other' (2005: 20-21). Differently, Zelizer theorised economic and intimate relations as inevitably entangled across the spectrum of social relations, and posited that their distinguishing factor is not the circulation of money, but 'the meanings and consequences' that people invest in, and expect from, its circulation (*ibid.*: 27). Her argument builds on a previous acknowledgement of the relational constitution of the self, which contrasts with assumptions of the existence of a 'single "real" person [...] within a given body' (*ibid.*: 17). Amidst this ontological fragmentation, 'feelings and meanings vary significantly, understandably, and properly from one interpersonal relationship to another' (*ibid.*: 17). Accordingly, each of us is continuously and ubiquitously engaged in 'relational work', which entails knotting 'differentiated social ties' (*ibid.*: 34-35). Beginning with household relations (e.g. caring for dependents, asset pooling/separation), economic activity does not constitute a separate sphere, but a tool to negotiate intimate ties (*ibid.*: 3): 'Money cohabits regularly with intimacy, and even sustains it' (*ibid.*: 28).

Zelizer's insights help to level the analytical field between intimate ties (e.g. marriage, partnership) and intimate services exchanged on the sex market. In fact, their difference lies not in the absence/presence of money, nor in the authentic/feigned feelings they supposedly engender, but in the meanings the parties involved attribute to the tie. In this relational work, different patterns of money circulation (e.g. periodic or ad hoc money transfers, in cash or in kind) constitute an important, but not unique, factor in negotiating reciprocal demands and expectations.

Elisabeth Bernstein's concept of 'bounded intimacy' (2007b) finds its roots here, as she argues that (some) sex work customers seek a connection deeper than 'just sex', but one still free from the demanding relational work entailed in sustaining a longer term intimate relationship. Services such as the 'girlfriend experience' (GFE), hence, respond to customers' demand for consuming an

intense erotic and emotional connection, but one ‘precisely delimited’ in time so as not to entangle parties involved in any subsequent negotiation over its consequences (*ibid.*: 127-130).

Authenticity is not incompatible with a money transaction, not even if the affects produced between two (or more) parties are exclusively prompted by, and bound to, a monetary transaction.⁹ Danielle Egan’s work on the relationship between exotic dancers working in strip clubs and their regular customers similarly demystifies the supposedly ontological separation between commodified and authentic feelings. She argued that regulars often perceive themselves as ‘lovers’ gifting dancers with ‘tokens of affection’, which has ‘tremendous force marking them both psychically and bodily’ (2006: 67). Her focus on consumers’ subjectification as lovers highlights the elusiveness of unilaterally defining the meaning of acts and feelings that are relationally produced, i.e. with erotic/sex workers.¹⁰

Finally, the neat separation between intimacy and the market is also being questioned in sociological literature on service jobs that blend body work and emotional labour, especially in relation to care professionals, who attend to patients’ ‘mind *and* body’ in work spaces where the borders between ‘care *and* commerce’ are blurred (Erickson & Stacey, 2013: 191).

Connectedness, however, does not entail a full-scale overlapping of intimacy and work. Still, no work can be acquired without considering how ‘differences in human welfare depend increasingly on market position’ (Zelizer, 2005: 39); nor that the pursuit of personal aspirations and fulfilment of economic and emotional responsibilities are intricately weaved across time and space.

⁹ As anticipated in Chapter 1 (section: ‘Scope limitations’), during my research I reflected on the meanings of authenticity and commodified intimacy through consumption of healing treatments touching my embodied self intimately. As a regular customer of a woman psychotherapist, I have consistently experienced the sessions we relationally engage in as authentically healing, and such feeling stretches beyond the space of our encounter in her studio. The money I pay acknowledges the time and money she invested building the skills I draw from to heal myself, the empathic work she does to explore roots of and solutions to my concerns, and the effort it takes her to manage and get rid of work-borne burdens afterwards. It also protects her from the assumption that she is available 24/7 for her customers, as a ‘true friend’ would/ought to be.

¹⁰ For example, the sight of a woman’s naked breasts could be erotically enticing to some and consoling to others; a strip club’s no-touch policy could ignite a customer’s desire to transgress or constitute a threshold to uphold in order to exercise his self-constraint.

As I show throughout this chapter, the life trajectories of the Italian and migrant women erotic and sex workers I interviewed and/or met during the research process reflected these complex entanglements of work and intimacy. I show how these women infuse different blends of sex, care and love in their work, in pursuit of social and/or spatial mobility and the ability to provide economically and emotionally for their beloved dependents (children, parents). At the same time, these women are able to draw, mould and uphold different borders to resist the encroachment of work into their personal time and space. Indeed, Wolkowitz invites us to critically explore 'the role of different kinds of boundaries, and the interests their maintenance or dispersal may serve' (2006: 26). More specific to their job, as the interview with Lina at the start of this chapter showed, erotic and sex workers articulate multiple, sometimes contradictory, subject positions to tame the intersecting stigmas they experience at and due to their work: from an ambitious entrepreneur of her erotic capital to one orphaned by romantic love, from the powerful queen to the sacrificial mother (or daughter) taking care of her dependents. In so doing, they articulate their reasons for experiencing their work as not only something from which they must detach, but also as meaningful, valuable and sometimes also pleasurable.

Simultaneously, these women's contradictory, shifting positions disclose the core tensions underlying processes of women's heteronormative subjectification, as 'woman' is compelled to trade the power of desirability for social despise, sexuality for respectability. In the next section, I discuss how erotic workers (i.e. image girls and lap dancers) articulate their subjectivities amidst an ambivalent aura of power and stigma.

Subjectification amidst desirability, gendered stigmas, and market opportunism

I often receive critiques like: 'Doesn't it bother you to be treated like an object? Doesn't it bother you this, or that?' Sincerely, it does not bother me because I know who I am, so I take my eighty Euros, I arrive home, I remove the mask, and put it back on the next day. I don't give a shit.

The extract above is from Maha, a young Italian woman who worked as an image girl to maintain herself throughout higher education.¹¹ Like Maha, all image girls I interviewed were intensely aware of the reproach surrounding their job, encompassing the whore stigma, and as she clearly articulates above, the objectification stigma. Yet, during the course of the interview, she described her job in enthusiastic terms:

I tell you sincerely, financial-wise, if one could be an image girl for life, if one could not get old, this is the job of a lifetime; you have fun, you're always treated like a half queen... I mean, that's another life! [...] Then, if you work from Thursday to Sunday, you earn a lot of money and you have a lot of fun. I enjoy staying with people and talking with them. So I really don't see anything bad in it, anything.

Maha's enthusiasm was partially a reaction to the stigma she anticipated feeling from me, an Italian woman researcher at least ten years her senior, especially as I undertook fieldwork during the period of sexual and economic austerity following Sexgate.¹² Her emphasis on her job's exceptional economic rewards contributes to presenting it as a smart choice; a subject position corresponding to that of the entrepreneur of one's erotic capital. Importantly, her reference to feeling like (half) a 'queen' conveys the multiple reasons why she finds her work pleasurable.

One such reason, the 'fun' she enjoys while entertaining male customers,¹³ is consistent with women's pleasurable consumption of the glamour emanating from striptease culture, as discussed in Chapter 3. Maha's second reason for enjoying her work is the confirmation and/or boosting of her confidence in the value of, and power emanating from, her heterosexual desirability it provides; the metaphor of the queen suggests that her desirability ignites male customers' deference. In fact, a woman's employment as an erotic worker – whether as an image girl, like Maha, or a lap dancer such as Lina – entails recognition of the heteronormative value of her erotic capital. At the same time, inasmuch as Maha

¹¹ I discussed Maha's combination of image work and higher education in Chapter 4.

¹² As described in the ethnographic background of this dissertation, in Chapter 1.

¹³ As described in Chapter 3, sit-in image girls – such as Maha – are allocated to tables of wealthy customers, whose alcohol consumption these image girls should prompt. Therefore, customers pay for this personalised entertainment indirectly, i.e. by consuming more than they would have had they not experienced these workers' pleasurable company.

values her job, to the point that she wishes she could do it for 'a lifetime', she is also aware that such value depreciates in time. 'Unfortunately, the society makes you stop,' she sighed, anticipating her inevitable stage exit. 'And you know what? There are those [women] who want to be image girls when they're forty. Come on, they're ridiculous!' she exclaimed disdainfully. Yet, immediately afterwards she questioned the implicit subject establishing age-bounded standards of feminine desirability and obsolescence: 'But to whom are you ridiculous? For the society, for everyone else...'.¹⁴

For other women, such jobs offer more than just status recognition, notably access to a space where they can construct confidence in their heterosexual value relationally, performing and consuming desirability relationally, with a male customer. Sometimes, this alone was the motivation to take up such work. 'Are your colleagues mostly students like yourself,' I asked her, 'or do they work as image girls as their main job?' 'For most it is a second job,' she said, listing examples of her colleagues' poorly paid service jobs, which image work supplemented.¹⁵

But I also met girls doing it because it was cool to be an image girl, because you would feel... It wasn't for the money, it was more an issue of self-esteem: if I work in a disco as an image girl, it means that I'm a hottie, right? Otherwise they would not call me, right?

'But why would a beautiful girl need to work to feel beautiful?' I asked her, puzzled by what sounded like a tautology to my ears. 'Come on, you know that insecurity rules,' she said unconvincingly, attempting to take distance from this feeling,

¹⁴ Age-defined boundaries of feminine desirability also explain why, her fear of entering a disreputable space notwithstanding, Maria Pia was flattered when she was offered work as an image girl near the age of forty:

'My friend told me "Listen, are you interested in coming to dance and be paid for it?" And you know, I'm not that tall, I'm not Claudia Schiffer, and I had just divorced... So I said, "but are you sure?" [...] I really was afraid it was a scam, so on the first [work] night I went with my car, but it was no scam. We danced quietly for two hours, they gave each of us two drink vouchers and one hundred thousand Lira [fifty Euros]. I couldn't believe it! To me, do you reckon?! That I was going dancing anyway!

¹⁵ I discussed the cost-effectiveness of erotic and sex work in Chapter 3.

I am not like that, I am not insecure. But talking to them [her colleagues], you understand that insecurity is part of ourselves. Whereas if you can say 'I work in a trade fair, in a disco, as hostess, as image girl', it erases that kind of insecurity I feel when I look at myself in the mirror.¹⁶

Maha's words aptly convey how confirmation of a woman's heterosexual desirability has the power to heal her insecurities; a power that originates, however, in the phallogentric definition of womanhood as lacking.¹⁷

Suspending judgement for a moment on its narrowly-defined, socially-constructed standards (e.g. slenderness, youthfulness), desirability is however a pleasurable affect that can inter alia tame feelings of loneliness, and despair. As it will emerge throughout this chapter, several women I interviewed foregrounded such existential, affective value of desirability. I contend that the coercion intrinsic to contemporary, normative standards of (feminine) desirability should not lead to a rejection of this latter's affective and existential value, but to its democratization (Meyers 2002: 145-7), expanding the possibilities of feeling desirable beings, which entails the desire to occupy the position of the object of someone else's desire, whom we desire. The meaning of the healing potential of desirability exceeds the reproduction of the 'heterosexual matrix' (Butler, 1990), even though excess is not 'consubstantial with resistance to relations of domination' (Mahmood 2001: 206).

For example, working as an image girl helped Kate recover the self-esteem buried underneath the claustrophobic housewifery she lived with her former boyfriend, who made her quit university to dedicate herself to work, the house and himself. 'I had a life like no other girl of my age would have: cooking, ironing, washing up, working... What was that?!' she exclaimed with disgust. 'I had lost my self-esteem. I don't know how to explain...I could not see any beauty in myself anymore.' Eventually, Kate left her boyfriend and returned to live with

¹⁶ In Chapter 2 I discussed the role and significance of the mirror in women's self-beautification practices, and subjectification.

¹⁷ In Chapter 1, I discussed how psychoanalysis defines 'woman' in negative terms, through the lack of the penis and its associated phallic power (Moore, 2007: 100). Such lack supposedly drives women to cultivate their heterosexual desirability in order to embody a man's object of desire (Grosz, 1990: 71). In Chapter 2, I discussed the healing power of pole dancing, as it restores/enhances women's confidence in their heterosexual desirability.

her mother. In the summer before returning to university, she worked in an ice-cream parlour and spent every night out:

I didn't want to think about it [the split]. Meanwhile, I got to know people and that's how I found this image job and started to understand that I am not ugly [...] Receiving compliments I hadn't gotten for a long time made me regain self-esteem, and I began to understand that people appreciated me.

To be picked up for a job confirming, or producing, her heterosexual desirability healed Kate's romantic love-borne injuries. Contextually, it provided her with a cost-effective way to cover her living expenses throughout higher education. However, and similarly to Maha, her peers stigmatised her for this work: 'People judge at first sight, and that's not fair. But then it's up to you not to care and to say that you don't give a shit; that's their business.' Faced with such widespread stigmatisation, she eventually accepted that all she cares about is that her partner 'knows how I am and that's it. For the rest, people will talk anyway, even when you do a simple job'. In claiming her loyalty to romantic love, Kate does not debunk the legitimacy of the whore stigma; it is narrowed to women who are unfaithful to this romantic love. Quite uniquely in my fieldwork, however, she showed sympathy for sex workers, acknowledging the economic rationale underlying their choices, against the backdrop of the increasingly blurred borders between leisure, erotic and sex markets:

There are customers who go to a disco and ask for a girl that will also do the afterwards.¹⁸ But they have another kind of girls for that, and another kind of payment. [...] However, to me, if a woman is single she can do as she wishes, I won't consider her a whore. Everyone's got a way of living, maybe she's a good girl but she needs money. I know some girls who did it, and they do it because of this. But if a girl is engaged and she goes with everyone, then to me she's a whore.

Possibly, part of Kate's sympathy derives from her own direct experience of the narrow, gendered and employability patterns that women in Italy, especially young and migrant women, can navigate across in order to cope with economic insecurity and pursue their aspirations of social/spatial mobility. In fact, as discussed in Chapter 3, at the time of our interview Kate was putting together a

¹⁸ As observed in Chapter 4, 'the afterwards' indicates the sale of sex acts after the entertainment consumed on the disco's premises.

Burlesque show to perform in Swiss casinos, as such work is exceptionally cost-effective and enables her to support herself while in higher education. Moreover, as I recount later, she knew the constraints her mother faced as she had migrated to Italy from Ukraine and could only choose to make a living from within a neat, gendered and racialised employment binary: either as care worker or sex worker.

As is becoming evident, the whore and objectification stigmas interplay differently, sometimes in contradiction, in women erotic and sex workers' articulation of their subjectivities. In the next section, I discuss how the spaces in which women work, amidst an ambivalent aura of desire and despise, further encroach on their subjectification.

Desired and despised: performing the whore for/at work

Fiona is a Romanian woman in her late twenties who works as a lap dancer at the Spice & Roll. Her fear of the whore stigma emerged clearly from her self-presentation as so chaste a woman, that she was ashamed of being nude in front of her mother. 'How did you start working as a lap dancer in Italy' I asked her. She replied:

The situation in Romania was very bad. I went to Spain, but there was no work, so I came back. Then somebody told me, 'why don't you try to this job?' At first I said 'no', because I was not accustomed. I said: 'no! I don't even undress in front of my mother!' But given the dire situation in Romania, I decided I'd try.

Similar to other migrant colleagues, whose West-ward trajectories I describe and discuss later in the chapter, erotic (or sex) work was not Fiona's first or preferred option. However, refusing to return to her home country's unappealing stagnation, she pursued social and spatial mobility through this stigmatised, and accessible, employment. 'Tell me one thing you like and one thing you don't like in your job,' I asked her. While answering, Fiona shivered with rage:

As my mother used to say: 'You're young, let yourself be seen.' So I like dancing, I like meeting people, I don't consider myself ugly and I like to show it. That's it basically. However, there are things I don't like: sometimes there are people who don't see lap dance for what it is, but see us as whores. Obviously, that

bothers me because I'm not here to do certain services; I'm only here for dancing, entertaining the person, amusing him, but not like that. Those are the things that bother me, when I'm treated as a sordid person.

As will become more evident throughout this chapter, many erotic and sex workers emphasised their maternal role and familial sacrifices to tame the work-borne stigmas they experience. As a child-free single woman exempt from the pressure of providing for her parents – whose livelihood was already being taken care of by her sister (see *infra*) – that sacrificial and hence respectable subject position was unavailable to Fiona. Contradictory only in appearance, in the extract above she turns her mother, in front of whom she was ashamed to undress in front of, into the person encouraging her to take advantage of her erotic capital.

Juggling her mother's function of dignifying her life and work choices, Fiona seeks to resist the multiple, intersecting stigmas enwrapping her and her job as a whole. In so doing, she also claims pride in the value of her heterosexual desirability, which she can confirm and/or boost relationally, through her male customers' desire. Ambivalently, however, to a large extent such value stems from her work emplacement as a whore, that men desire intensely for her sexuality, but despise for her promiscuity. In fact, within the space of strip clubs, women strippers and lap dancers are 'both adored and stigmatized, valued and devalued as physical sexual beings' (Price-Glynn, 2010: 21); while outside, they are still seen as socially deviant (Colosi, 2012: 111-112; Murphy, 2003: 318).¹⁹ Analogously to pole dancers, as discussed throughout this dissertation, Fiona rejects this ambivalence intrinsic to the position of the whore in

¹⁹ In contrast, and probably partly driven by the commercial success of movies like *Magic Mike* (Soderbergh, 2012) and *The Full Monty* (Cattaneo, 1997), male stripping in heterosexual settings seems to be socially *valued*. I got this impression when a sports' shop assistant, who knew neither me nor my research, used the fact that he was a male stripper to impress me. After showing me pictures of himself in body building contests, Giorgio whispered to me that he was part of a male strippers' group. I genuinely could not hide my amazement at such serendipity and I asked him for an interview, which seemed to please him. Twice we met, and twice he postponed the interview to a subsequent occasion. I eventually realised that he was using the interview as a lure and I let the contact drop. Yet it was interesting that he proudly claimed his (more or less occasional) job as an erotic performer: not only did he disclose this information voluntarily, but he also expected such a disclosure to inflate his desirability in my eyes. I did not find literature discussing heterosexual men's engagement in erotic work; hence, the validity of this ethnographic impression requires further exploration.

heteronormativity, and seeks to disavow the stigma by passing it onto 'sordid' persons – probably meaning, along with Lina, women who sell sex acts.

At the same time, some lap dancers and acrobatic strippers I interviewed reported experiencing much strain in upholding their bodily borders, as night clubs thrive on male customers' gendered assumptions on their promiscuity and sexual availability. This is for example evincible from Mirca's words below:

I used to earn between two and three hundred Euros a night for a twenty to thirty minute solo [acrobatic stripping] show, but I worked in clubs where you don't have to do...whatever. Because there, club owners don't want those who don't make 'extras'.²⁰ So if you don't work with this [Mirca pointed at her vagina], it's better to turn around fast; once people know you, they don't even invite you for a drink. Unfortunately, here it is not like in the UK or in America, where clubs are chock full only to watch...Italians are (h)...Italians are sick (h). Not only do they want to touch you, but they'd want to do everything and they invite you for a drink only to ask if you will leave the club with them or if you will do some extras inside.

Mirca's continuous sniggering signaled her embarrassment at recounting how frequently male customers attempted to transgress night clubs' no-touch rule, thereby mirroring the stigma of the whore as a counterweight to her intense sexual desirability in their eyes. Interestingly, she used her work experience abroad, in countries that many of my interviewees associated with liberal sexual mores, to racialise her customers as primitively hyper-sexual.²¹ 'But did club owners know?' I asked her, wondering to what extent such transgressive demands rather hinted at the existence of an unofficial, unspoken policy of incitement thereof. Mirca responded:

Some owners pretend they don't know anything. So for example, when you tell them 'I will only come if I can work clean',²² they'll say 'don't worry, come, everything's clean here'; but then eventually it's not clean at all! And you know this is the case already when you see there are dark curtains and bouncers pass

²⁰ 'Extras' is a widely used jargon for the sale of sex acts on the clubs' premises, which contravenes both the official no-touch policy and the prostitution law. I discussed the Italian prostitution law in Chapter 4.

²¹ I discussed the intersections between racialised temporality and sexuality in Chapter 4.

²² Most lap dancers and night club employees I interviewed used the dirt/clean dichotomy to signify the sale of sex acts within a night club premises that however constitutes a violation of the Merlin Law. In Chapter 3, footnote 21, I discussed the symbolic meaning of 'dirt' for Victorian ('respectable') middle classes.

by without looking inside...Other places enforce such tight controls that customers can't even get close to you. Really, any strip show, any dance needs to be done from the distance. In such places, really nothing happens; and if someone is caught making inappropriate advances, he'll be kicked out.

Fieldwork in night clubs simultaneously brought to the fore male customers' widespread assumption that women, and especially migrant women erotic workers, are available to engage in sex acts on demand (i.e. promiscuous). One night at Danny's, I was sitting next to a table of young men – a football team, as it turned out. 'How did you end up here tonight?' I asked the man next to me, whom I thought looked quite bored by the entertainment on stage. 'You see that guy over there?' he asked me, pointing to a man on the opposite end of the table who was embracing the waist of a woman seated on his lap. 'It's his birthday. She works here, so he brought us all here to celebrate.' We continued chatting about football and my research, and after a few minutes I saw the couple stand up and leave hand in hand. 'Did you see that? Poor guy,' he said shaking his head, 'he's in love with her but she treats him like an ATM machine. She takes him to the private area and each time he pays fifty Euros.' 'What for?' I asked. 'Just a private dance,' he sighed, 'but elsewhere you can have extras if you pay.'

Academic literature discusses transgressions of the no-touch rule in strip clubs only as a strategy that some lap dancers use to maximise earnings through unfair competition, attracting their colleagues' resentment (Colosi, 2012: 89). In Italy, these acts constitute a criminal offence.²³ However, some scholars acknowledge their frequency (see for example: Serughetti, 2013: 280; Palmisano, 2010: 51), which might be more intense for migrant women, whose residency is tied to a work contract, although this would need to be verified through research. The actuality of extras notwithstanding, their plausibility arguably functions as a device prompting male customers' heteronormative subjectification, contributing to making them feel like 'real men' in their anxious quest (Berlant 2012) for heterosexual sex; a possibility that highlights a research field still largely unexplored.

²³ In Chapter 4 I discussed in depth the Italian prostitution law.

As I show in the next section, the value of erotic workers' extras is further boosted by their transgressive significance in a country upholding the neat wife/whore binary, where the moral and legal discipline of sexuality is heavily influenced by the Catholic Church.

Recreational sex between the market and the Catholic Church

I've always told girls [lap dancers] that I don't want them to ever put feelings in what they do – e.g. 'I make him fall in love so he comes every night, he drinks, and I'm better off.' No. No feelings. This is work. They have to tell him: 'This is my work, I'm here with you as long as you want, but don't think that outside then...' At the beginning, it was all like that: they had customers buying them flats, cars. [...] So when we saw that some girls exaggerated and tried to make customers fall in love with them, we began a selection and eliminated those messing up families.

Gianna works as the human resources' manager at the Spice & Roll – a renowned night club located in one of Italy's summer entertainment capitals on the Eastern Riviera. She invited me to interview her at work before opening hours. The entrance was down a flight of stair, in the basement of an anonymous commercial building, but the club's interior was majestic: golden mirror frames, classical columns, brocade velvet curtains and sofas. This grandeur was complemented by images of naked and alluring women pasted on surfaces where drinks could be placed – from the bar counter to wall shelves. A fixed iron pole was at the centre of the dance floor, with other poles scattered at its margins, each surrounded by U-shaped sitting areas with thick velvet curtains, which were used to seal off each area from third parties' view. With the lights on and no-one else but Gianna and I sitting on the sofa, I felt as if I was visiting a merry-go-round engineer before s/he turns the ride on.

As Gianna explained, the club's policy requires lap dancers to separate their feelings from work. Moreover, their relationship with male customers ought to remain spatially bounded to the club, to prevent spill-over effects on customers' intimate sphere.²⁴ Yet, as cogently argued by Egan (2006), customers' needs and

²⁴ Later in this chapter, I show how part of workers' resistance to this work-imposed alienation from their feelings entailed stressing their inalienability, contextually blurring the separation between work and intimacy.

desire may be at odds with the club's policy, as they wish to feel romance and love with precisely one, and not a whatever worker. In turn, regulars are an important source of income for workers (*ibid.*: 64). In a work environment so densely saturated with contradictory affective demands, desires and prohibitions,²⁵ lap dancers' finances, employment and the sustainability of the club they work for depend on their ability to manage these slippery and dangerous boundaries. 'You have to understand if he comes for her because she does some extras or because he's got a crush on her, which...ok, it will pass shortly if she's skilled,' Gianna continued, describing her policing role and performance assessment criteria. 'These are delicate things, especially people's feelings. It takes nothing...So fixed-term girls need to be able to do this, otherwise... [they are fired]'

Part of the danger entailed in transgressing the slippery, subjective borders between work and intimacy, authentic or routinised feelings, which are relationally weaved by women workers' and male customers, is the threat that such will encroach on the normativity of the wife/whore binary; and hence, on the reciprocal, complementary functionality of marriage and prostitution. 'Call me when you reach home, but from the landline, ok?!' Gianna said mightily, hanging up the only phone call she had answered during our interview. 'Was it your daughter?' I asked, taken aback by this break in her shrewd manager position. 'Yes,' she rumbled. Gianna's daughter was just a handful of years younger than some of the lap dancers I interviewed, and I wondered how she and her older brother managed the stigma enwrapping their mother's workspace. 'Do your children know about your job?' I asked Gianna. 'They have

²⁵ For example, the following extract from Gianna's interview further hints at the contradictory tensions moulding lap dancers' job and work spaces, as their alcohol-propelling duties are simultaneously their core function and an indicator of their greediness. Such represents a stereotype stemming from, and exacerbating, their stigmatisation as whores:

I: How long does a contract with a lap dancer last?

Gianna: It depends, sometimes one night only. Unfortunately this is not a job where you put stamps on envelopes and send them: here, if you're good then you work, if not it's hard.

I: And how do you assess if an employee is good at her job?

G.: If customers buy her drinks, if she drinks, if they ask for her again...Sometimes they say 'no, not that one, she's too arrogant...It depends. Essentially, they don't have to make anything that difficult! They ought to be kind and nice and let them [the men] speak, but many are just self-interested, you know? They just push him to spend money on drinks.

always known everything,' she replied with relief,²⁶ 'but they know that if I don't come back home one night, they should go to their grandparents' house.' She continued, as if surrendered to an unpredictable fate, 'If an officer comes in for a check and is not open-minded, well...' However tight the club's internal policing of extras, there is leeway in the current prostitution law in terms of aiding and abetting prostitution; it is as if Damocles' sword is menacingly swinging over these businesses' heads. 'The problem is that laws in Italy aren't suitable,' Gianna continued, shaking her head with exasperation,

clubs such as this are just...like this...I mean, law-wise you don't know what they are. Discos are still disciplined by laws issued under Mussolini [(Regno d'Italia, 1931)], can you imagine? [...] Year after year there have been integrations, modifications...but why don't you just put it down clearly? Discos have to do this and that, night clubs need to have this and that....No. Everything is left to the imagination of whoever arrives.

The relevance of Gianna's remark on the anachronism of public entertainment venues' legal discipline was further compounded by the dramatic and fast-paced economic and cultural transformations Italy went through after the end of WWII.²⁷ In turn, this brings to light the influence of the Catholic Church on the legal discipline of sexuality in Italy, notably in the form of an institutional resistance to normalising recreational sex.

The neat separation between marriage and prostitution was, in fact, explicitly ruled by the Council of Trent (1545-1563), that assimilated any non- or extra-marital sexual relation (fornication, adultery, concubinage) to prostitution (Ferrante, 1998: 140-141; Ferrante, 1987: 1014). While Luther and Calvin de-sacralised marriage and allowed divorce, the Catholic Church reaffirmed instead

²⁶ Gianna was indeed highly stigmatized for her job. For example, she said that she 'learnt not greet anyone anymore outside of the club. Only if someone comes to me and says: "Gianna, hi." Then I'd would say, "Ah! Hi!" in return. I prefer someone telling me that I'm ill-mannered, rather than greeting anyone who turns his head pretending not to see me.'

²⁷ National historiography conventionally adopts 1958 as the year marking the beginning of *miracolo economico* (economic miracle), which brought about fast-paced, large-scale and dramatic socioeconomic transformations; transformations that took a century to roll out in other European countries (Willson, 2011: 199; Cullen, 2013: 38). The 'miracle' was enabled by both Italy's inclusion in the US funded 'Marshall Plan' designed to boost post WWII Western European states' economic recovery amidst the rising Cold War, and the country's domestic availability of a cheap labour force i.e. southern Italians who migrated north-ward where economic investment concentrated (Pollard 2008: 132; see also: Mingione & Quassoli 2000: 40; Colombo & Sciortino 2004; Teti 1993: 225).

its meaning as a 'divinely ordained' union (Hirshman & Larson, 1998: 49-51), and to date it remains an indissoluble bond (Müller 2013). However to safeguard women's premarital chastity, the reproductive purpose of marital sex, and men's heterosexual orientation, the Church needs a distinct group of abject women (i.e. prostitutes) available to absorb, and fuel, men's sexual drive exceeding marriage and reproduction.²⁸ Therefore, the anachronism of the Italian state discipline of night entertainment contributes to maintaining a neat separation of marriage and prostitution, chaste women and whores, which adult businesses would otherwise profitably blur.

Interestingly, and consistently with the transformations of sex markets in Italy I discussed in Chapter 4, from the end of the 1990s, it has been mostly migrant women who have been hired to work as abject women. As Gianna described:

In the beginning, lap dancers were only and exclusively Italians. Around 1999, there was the invasion of Russians. All the Russian women came here, and they were all...Well, you know, each nationality has its own things. Russians came to look for a husband and money: I've seen girls getting married, having children and then sending their husband to hell and keeping everything – flats, cars...Ah, Russians were really fearsome! Then there was the period of extra communarians, but that was a mess because if they didn't have visas you couldn't let them work. Then the Hungarians came: they were beautiful and they were not like the Russians, who would take one and take him for everything. Hungarians were ok, but the problem with them was that many drank a lot and became unmanageable. When Romanians came, the decline began, so to speak. Because...Romanians are pretty gypsy: they don't have the refinement of the Russians or the elegance of the Hungarians. Maybe they lose their minds for a phone top up, just like that. They are also here to find a husband, regardless of whether he is rich or poor: the important thing is that they find one, because they say that all Romanians are assholes and Italians are much better. They think Italians respect women while Romanians don't. Lately, after they had almost disappeared completely, Italians are returning – it's the economic crisis, you know.

Gianna's words are a concentration of racialised stereotypes of the whore as a promiscuous, greedy social climber, idle or desperately destitute woman; a role and job that is, today, by and large sublet to and performed by migrant women. Teela Sanders and Kate Hardy observed that migrant women constitute one

²⁸ In Chapter 4 I argued that the Catholic Church tactically supports regulationism, as a lesser evil than male homosexuality, feeding into contemporary Italy's nostalgia for the lost brothel.

third of the UK striptease industry's workforce (2013: 16), and Janine Dahinden showed that all cabaret dancers in Switzerland are migrant women (2010: 324). Similar data on Italy is not available, but my fieldwork confirms the conspicuous presence of migrant women working in night clubs. Moreover, several scholars have shown that jobs available to migrant women in the EU are overwhelmingly concentrated in the domestic, care and sex sectors (see for example: Agustín, 2007: 53; Andrijasevic, 2010: 74). Only Gianna's compatriots – i.e. Western (Italian) women – are spared stigmatisation and presented as rational market agents in the face of the spiralling economic crisis.

Within such a work space, dense with contradictory demands and expectations, desire and despise, migrant women are further stigmatised for their nationality. In Gianna's words above, and as discussed in Chapter 4, such stigmatisation puts racialised assumptions on sexual morality. At the same time, as I discuss in the following section, migrant women's West-ward trajectories in pursuit of social/spatial mobility and the ability to fulfil their emotional and/or economic responsibilities frequently put them in the position to invest different blends of sex, care, and love into their work. By highlighting the connectedness of the market (or work) and intimate spheres, I unveil the class-based and racialised assumptions underlying this cultural construction, on which the stigmatisation of prostitution/sex work crucially relies.

Bearing with stigmatisation in pursuit of a normal life

'I finished university more than seven years ago, and I started working in a bank, but soon realised I did not like it,' Demi told me. In response to my question of how she began working as a lap dancer, Demi continued:

I wanted to travel the world a bit. So the first job I found...I was young, I was twenty-three years old, and I went to work in Dubai as a hostess for *sheikhs*. I used to do private parties with young girls and models. Then, five years ago, I was offered a job in a night club in Italy. Now it's closed, but I found another.

As for Fiona, also for Demi, working in erotic entertainment was the first viable option for her to travel and support herself outside her country. Although it was arguably not the job of her dreams, it enabled her to enjoy pleasures she valued:

travelling, partaking in glamorous parties organised by customers she was paid to entertain, pursuing higher education,²⁹ and finding romantic love. In fact, Demi is now married to an Italian man; together, they are planning their journey to the next life and work stage. 'He's got relatives in Florida. He'll sell his flat and the business, and I am going to get an internship in the USA,' she said confidently, knowing that this time she would have been able to rely on a family network to help settle in.³⁰ 'Tell me one thing you like and one thing you don't like in your job,' I asked her.

A beautiful thing? Maybe...that you always keep fit, even if you're over thirty. And a bad one is that you meet so many lost people and you feel sorry that they spend their money like that, inside these night clubs. And maybe talking to them you also get depressed, because they bring you down. It's a psychologist's work, let's say.

Similar to Fiona, Maha, and many other erotic workers I interviewed, Demi experienced her workplace as a space for her to confirm, or construct, confidence in her heterosexual desirability. As Lina, Mimì, and other erotic and sex workers (see *infra*), she also stressed her job's healing function, thereby contributing to dignify it in the face of widespread stigmatization.

Tiffany, a twenty-three year-old Moroccan woman, also resorted to working as a lap dancer in order to reside and work legally in Italy:

I came from Morocco to join my father and, at first, I found a normal job in a factory. But after three months they did not renew my visa, so...how to renew it? How should I do, how should I not...eventually a female friend told me: 'listen, do this!' [lap dancing] I did not even know...I had never seen this world, not even on TV... but she said, 'do it at least to renew the visa!'...So I started, I liked it, and I stayed on.

Tiffany also did not claim her lap dancing job to be her best choice, but it was the only viable option she found to stay in Italy legally after the factory refused to offer her a formal contract, which would have entailed higher labour costs. 'How's the job, financial-wise? Do you manage to live off it?' I asked her. 'Yes,'

²⁹ As I said in Chapter 3, Demi was studying for a MA in Political Economy.

³⁰ Many migrants move following a chain model, whereby they 'lean on those who immigrated before them for welcome, help in finding housing or work and in facing the psychological cost of the move, and at times even money for the purchase of a ticket' (Colombo & Sciortino, 2004: 61).

she said, smiling for the first time, 'with this job I manage to pay everything and even send some money to my mother.' Her mother never left their home country to follow her husband, who died meanwhile, and as an only child, Tiffany is now responsible for her mother's livelihood. Hence Tiffany's stigmatised job in erotic entertainment enables her to both fulfil her family responsibilities and remain self-sufficient. 'Tell me one thing you like and one you thing you dislike in this job,' I asked.

I don't like it because it's a different world, but I like it because you have fun and are well-off on the economic level. But sometimes I say, 'uff, I also want a normal life, to sleep at night and wake up in the morning'. That's what I think. Sleeping in the day time is not like sleeping at night. And normal life is not here; this is another world.

Like many of her peers figuring in this chapter, Tiffany described her job as fun and enjoyable, but also burdensome, specifically in how it affects her capacity to have a normal life. At the same time, the exceptional economic rewards on her socially stigmatized job, enable her access to opportunities she values: residing in a country far away from home but not too far as to entail neglecting her family bonds, and being self-sufficient but not selfish. 'What is a normal life?' I asked her. 'For example, having a boyfriend,' she replied without hesitation. 'Don't you have one now?' I asked. 'No, no,' she replied hurriedly, and continued:

You know, we don't do anything wrong, but let's say that people sometimes misunderstand. In my view, being in a relationship with someone while doing this job is like taking a piss: it's better to remain single. Sometimes things [affairs] happen, but I don't want any long relationship. Because for me, nowhere in the world is there a person who accepts that you live in this world. Only very few people understand you're doing nothing wrong.

Similar to Lina, Tiffany highlights the trade off she experiences between economic self-sufficiency and romantic love. Although she claims chastity, stating that she does 'nothing wrong' (i.e. selling sex acts), she knows that her job is incompatible with a steady relationship. Meanwhile, both choose to keep a

job that ensures their economic independence rather than opting for a romantic relationship.³¹

Yet, rather than a sign of the intrinsic incompatibility of erotic work and a woman's enjoyment of intimacy, for women like Lina and Tiffany, postponing long-term relationships seems to reflect in part a choice enabling them to strengthen their economic self-reliance. This holds true also for Mimì, who started working as a lap dancer as part of her exit strategy from an intimate relationship upon which she had been economically reliant. 'My husband worked in a night club and I was the cloakroom attendant there,' Mimì recalled in response to my question of how she began working as a lap dancer. 'One day I said to myself, "Why not? Do I lack anything to do it?" So I tried. And I also needed money, so I began working.' They split shortly after, and Mimì's choice to scale up her earnings through lap dancing likely reflected the growing tensions in their relationship.

As many other colleagues, Mimì experienced her job as partly pleasurable and partly painful, due to the stigma it attracted. 'How did you feel the first time you stripped?' I asked, 'Any shyness?' 'No. I don't know, it must be because of my character: I am Gemini and I enjoy being in contact with people,' she said naughtily. 'What do you like and what do you dislike in your job?' I asked. 'Mmmh...I like dancing because I always enjoyed dancing'. 'Any dance in particular?' I asked.

Well, no, just the standard dance with the pole. But maybe because I enjoy provoking, yes! (h) I like dancing, getting to know people, talking to them, listening to them. Actually, sometimes I feel like a psychologist; as if we don't have enough problems of our own! But what I don't like is that sometimes they classify you as 'blank'. Because maybe they don't know; they think that, since

³¹ Significantly, Fiona's sister also faced these narrow, gendered and racialised employability patterns when she travelled West-ward. In fact, mobility restrictions were eased after Romania joined the EU in 2007, but work restrictions were still imposed by the Italian government on 1 January 2012 (Popescu 2012). Below, Fiona recounts how her sister dropped her stigmatised, lap dancing job after marrying an Italian man, shifting from the position of the whore to that of the wife and mother: 'My sister did this job too until she got married and had a family. She left the country before me, and she left to do this job. At that time, these were the only chances you had.' Although her trajectory confirms the normativity of the wife/whore binary in Italy, Fiona's sister was able to pursue her social and/or spatial mobility, albeit by accepting to enter first through a socially stigmatised job.

you're a [lap] dancer, you undress and remain naked...but actually, at the seaside you are in a slip and bra.³² Here, you dance with the pole and you do nothing wrong. So I don't think that...but anyway, people classify you in some specific ways. There are still prejudices! (h)

To disavow the gendered stigmas she anticipated from me, and similar to many women lap dancers I interviewed, Mimì articulated different subject positions: the psychologist; the woman who enjoys the power of her desirability; and the chaste woman who does 'nothing wrong'. Notwithstanding her presentation of her job as pleasurable and gratifying, Mimì – like Lina – also looked older than her age, or very tired. 'I'm thirty-three years old, but I surely don't intend to do this job until I'm forty!' she said surprisingly, as I thought she was around that age already. Mimì continued:

Maybe I'll work another year or two, but I don't know...because maybe psychically I can't take it anymore. It's not always a bed of roses, and it's becoming more difficult.³³ It's normal that (h) you have to think about what to do next.

'What job would you like to do after?' I asked Mimì. 'Me? Beautician. Nails. I want to take a [training] course and do that,' she said coldly, 'but I'd have to sell my properties in Romania to open my own place here. This is not the right time though, with this crisis I'd lose money.' 'Do you have properties in Romania?' I asked, realising that – like Lina – Mimì had also managed to build real estate capital and economically invest in her future through her however stigmatised job. 'Oh yes, I have no [economic] problems. What matters is that I've lived in Italy for fifteen years: my life is here, my daughter is here, I prefer to live here,' she said in a blow. It was as if she felt that an important part of what makes her

³² This is what I defined the 'beach metaphor', through which women erotic workers erase the economic incentive underlying their choice to strip for male customers, equating it to their public display of nudity for their own fun and pleasure. Also Mirca this metaphor when recounting how she chose to work as a table dancer in Australia:

'I met an Italian girl who could not find a job, so she started being an escort. She told me: "Look, it is better to be a luxury whore than to show your boobs for two hundred or three hundred dollars." Well, what's wrong with showing boobs for two to three hundred dollars, I thought. I mean, you go to the beach topless, so what's wrong with it? Why can't I do it in a place where they pay me precisely for that?!

³³ She did not explain why, but as Milena said in Chapter 3, lap dancing is a less profitable job now than it was before the economic crisis hit many Western European countries. This also occurred in the context of the proliferation of online pornography and amateur portals (Preciado 2013: 37-38).

bear her job's hardships – i.e. the ability to stay in a country of her choice, where she lives, works, has established intimate ties, and wants to remain in the future – was under threat. 'I got used to the mentality over here,' she continued, 'women are much more protected here than in Romania.' As Mimì spoke, I could not avoid thinking about the feminicide panic that erupted in the aftermath of Sexgate scandal in Italy.³⁴ 'Well, bad things happen here too,' I said, questioning her assumption that the 'mentality' within which I was raised was better than hers, 'so many women are killed by their husbands, for example.' 'Ah yes, yes, that's true,' she agreed. 'Guess that's why I'm happy to be single!' I joked – a bitter joke nonetheless. 'Bravo!' she exclaimed, with no shred of irony but empathy neither. 'For me, I always had a partner; to be alone...I suffer loneliness. Thinking about waking up in the morning and being alone kills me inside,' she explained. Although she has borne two failed marriages and the stigmas surrounding her job notwithstanding, Mimì had not given up on what makes her feel alive: romantic love, and the relational pleasures intrinsic to desire and desirability.

As has become clear, the women I interviewed frequently used romantic love to articulate different subject positions from which they attempt to resist multiple work-borne stigmas. It is a protective affect shielding Kate from accusations of promiscuity; a melancholic attachment³⁵ that Lina and Tiffany anticipatorily regret while pursuing their personal aspirations through a profitable job; a healing that treats Mimì's existential loneliness, which is possibly exacerbated by her work-borne stigmatisation in wider social relations.³⁶

In the next section, I show how the possibility of feeling love at work offered workers a possibility for resisting both work-imposed alienation from their feelings, and stigmatisation as whores.

³⁴ As discussed in Chapter 1.

³⁵ Melancholia is a condition resulting from a subject's 'desire to temporize an experience of the loss of an object or scene with which she has identified her ego continuity' (Berlant 2010b: 94).

³⁶ It might not be inconsequential that both of Mimì's ex-husbands either worked at or patronised adult entertainment venues.

The bonds and the powers of love

'There's nothing wrong in this job', Mimì reiterated at the conclusion of our interview.

You enjoy yourself, you're in beautiful company, you drink something, see a show, a dance. And several times friendships are established, and love stories too! I met my [second] husband in the night club where I worked for seven years. It was the first day I worked as lap dancer, and we stayed together seven years! So it's not true that a love story cannot grow here; yes, you have fun, but also a love story can grow.

Feeling love at work transgresses the market-imposed alienation of/from her feelings, which was articulated earlier in this chapter by Gianna. For Mimì, resistance to work entails claiming ownership over her feelings and a subject position different from that which she is employed to occupy – i.e. the whore, who is promiscuous and unable to commit to romantic love. Overall, her capacity to feel love at work, and for a man met at work, amounts to an affirmation of her humanity in the face of both work-borne stigmas and the capitalism-imposed alienation of her labour (i.e. her feelings).

The redeeming power of love emerged even more forcefully in the case of Zeina, a Romanian lap dancer in her late twenties who has worked at the Spice & Roll for several years. Like most of her colleagues, Zeina also expressed that lap dancing was a good-enough deal: in pursuit of personal aspirations, lap dancing offered her the possibility to get out of her country's stagnating domestic labour market through the narrow tangles that Western countries' migration laws leave open to Romanian women.

I finished the high school in Romania and was looking for a job, but couldn't find any there. You know how it is; it's the same thing everywhere. They all look for experienced people, but when you've just finish high school, you don't have any. So no-one gave me a chance. One day, a friend told me, 'if you want to go to Italy, you can do lap dancing and they will pay you so and so'. So I said, 'fine, I'll go'. I was young, I was only eighteen, and I stayed with a very nice girl. I was lucky, because there are also bad stories happening.³⁷

³⁷ I did not ask to what extent she was aware of these 'bad stories' when she migrated, and trafficking, as I said in the Introduction, is beyond the scope of this dissertation. However, it is an accepted expectation that knowledge, experience, and prudence increase linearly as we go

At first, Zeina experienced her work as pleasurable, entertaining, and glamorous:

In the beginning, it was alright – fun, money, evenings out – even though I could not speak any Italian!! (h) Then, I met my husband – ex-husband now – but after three months, I had to go back to Romania because my visa expired. Then, I kept coming to do this job anyway because I loved him. Eventually we got married, and he made me stop working.

Like Mimì, Zeina met the man she fell in love with at work, and it was this affect that bonded them across national boundaries, attracting her to return to Italy even though she could only reside there legally if she had a job quite narrowly restricted to erotic entertainment. Love bonded her to a stigmatised job, and marriage to a native citizen released her from this promiscuous bond. At the same time, however, marriage entailed stopping work, becoming a good wife and mother, and relinquishing her economic independence. When ‘things turned bad’ and they separated, Zeina returned to occupying the position of the bad woman, further despised for her foreign nationality. Betrayed by romantic love once already, she now protectively guards her economic independence in the face of her current partner’s offer to shoulder their livelihoods.

I don’t want to depend on him. If it was myself only, it would be ok, but there is also my son and my mother; and I’m too used to being independent. [...] On top of this there is no work for Italians, so when they understand that you’re foreigner, things are even worse.³⁸ Let’s see. I don’t know. This job makes me feel good and bad, sincerely. Good because I’m independent; bad because I can’t have a family.

‘But you have a family, don’t you?’ I asked, trying to understand what she felt she lacked living with her mother and son, and having an intimate tie with a (male) partner. Zeina responded:

through our life journey; and so is the association of youth with temerity. Scholarship on ‘edgework’ highlighted that ‘risk-taking’ is a positively valued behaviour for many Western people, so much so that some engage in it voluntarily for the sake of learning how to manage risky edges and feel accordingly powerful (see for example: Lyng, 1990; Lyng, 2005).

³⁸ I did not specifically ask what kind of discrimination she faced. As discussed in Chapter 4, however, (especially young) migrant women in Italy are widely labeled as whores. I showed that xenophobia is increasing and, amidst stagnating economic circumstances, it is possible that some employers prefer to give precedence to Italians, especially in less exploitative jobs. Menial jobs, in fact, have long been contracted out to migrant workers (Mingione & Quassoli, 2000: 45).

Ok, yes I have a family, but it's not like sleeping every night at home with your husband...it's a bit different, isn't it? I'm happy because my son can always see me, and I can offer him and my mother anything they want...anything. But I lack that thing that girls here can't have...

Having a family – by which she evidently means a man-headed household – seems to entail establishing a bond with a man that, in her experience, was incompatible with maintaining economic independence. Lina and Tiffany's anticipatory nostalgia for romantic love, also hint at similar trade-offs. Meanwhile, Zeina's stigmatised job that enables her to sustain her independence, and spend time with her son:

If I worked during the day, first of all, the money would not be enough; and secondly, I would not be able to spend the whole day with my son. So I work while my son is sleeping, and I stay with him during the day. In the morning my mother takes him to the kindergarten, and when he comes back I'm already awake. If I was doing a normal job, from 8am till 5pm, I would be missing all these things: him as a little child. At least I'm here for him during the day. So this is another reason why I chose this work. First of all, it's the money, because that's normal; and secondly, because I am free throughout the day.

The lines between erotic work, care, love and work blur in Zeina's description of her female-headed household's day-to-day management. It is the cost-effectiveness and ab-normal work hours of her stigmatised job in adult entertainment that enables her to feed her intimate ties both economically and emotionally. In turn, it is the mother's (unpaid) care work that ensures Zeina's son can have it all: economic comfort, care, and love. Stressing her caring responsibilities for her dependents, both as a mother and a daughter, Zeina voices a position which enables her to tame the whore stigma she knows to be enwrapped in. For the love of her dependents, she is further sacrificing her aspiration of living in a man-headed household. Underneath her sacrificial position, however, lays a deeper meaning: there is also a statement of independence. The 'thing that girls can't have' is seemingly two things: having a romantic love relationship with a man, and maintaining their economic independence (from him).

I was about to thank Zeina for her time and leave, when suddenly I saw her greeting someone behind me. I turned and saw three young men walking down

to the club's entrance. As soon as they slipped through the door, where she would also return after our interview, she resumed talking about how love made her work pleasurable:

I like this job. It's never boring. Never. You also find nice people; it's not that everyone here is a bastard and ignorant. You also find people with interesting experiences, and who come here, let's say, to forget some bad ones; also normal people that you meet during stag parties. Actually, I had an affair with a guy who came to the club. All the customers say, 'ah you're made of stone, you're very cold girls'. But it is not true, we also have feelings. If I see a handsome guy, I can fall in love even if I'm here; it's a very normal thing! They say, 'ah, since you work here, you'll never have an affair with someone you met here'. But instead no, it's not true.

Notwithstanding or because her workplace policy requires lap dancers to keep work and feelings separate, the possibility of feeling love at work makes Zeina feel like a full-fledged human being. As for Mimì, it expresses a form of resistance to work-imposed alienation from her (embodied) labour power – i.e. her emotions and feelings. 'But work is work, isn't it?' I asked somewhat disoriented, as – until that point – I had assumed that erotic and sex workers strove to keep neat boundaries between their work and intimate spheres.

Work is work, but it can happen. Trust me, it can happen, because also young men come. Maybe he ended up here with his friends by chance, and you immediately see that he's not a regular, that he's a decent guy, beautiful, who speaks well...it's normal that you fall in love. And this makes this job even more difficult, because if you fall in love with one who comes here, then it's over, you don't work anymore [...] I mean, if he comes in and I'm working with someone else, then I can't continue, I lose my mind and I can't work anymore (h). Love exists in this job too. It exists. And this is beautiful. Yes.

Both the memories and the possibility of meeting Prince Charming at work console Zeina as she endures the burdens – i.e. stigma, racism, and the trade-off between love and economic independence – entailed in hanging on to her dream of living a normal life in the country of her choice. Hence, her attachment to love at work constitutes an ambivalent coping strategy, akin to what Lauren Berlant defined 'cruel optimism', i.e. an

affective attachment to what we call “the good life”, which is for so many a bad life that wears out the subjects who nonetheless, and at the same time, find their conditions of possibility within it. (Berlant 2010b: 97)

In the next section, I show how the cruelly optimistic attachments that blur the lines between sex, love, care and work become more intensely visible in the narratives of migrant women travelling West-ward and working in street-based sex.³⁹

Sex, love, care and work

‘Work is not going well,’ Stefania told me one night while we were on patrol with the mobile unit, ‘every day I have more and more expenses. I worry myself a lot when I have so many things to pay, and I can’t sleep at night.’ A sparkling and welcoming young Romanian woman, my colleagues had already known Stefania for several years; and during each night patrol they looked forward to finding her stationed at her usual corner. That winter night, however, she was struggling: her heating costs were high and her husband had lost his job because houses were not selling and construction companies – such as the one he worked for – were failing. In Romania, her mother had ‘finally been abandoned [sic]’ by her abusive husband; a husband she never dared leaving out of fear of being stigmatised as a whore. Now, Stefania was caring for her mother more intensely, both economically and emotionally. As Stefania’s economic responsibilities intensified, so did her psychological exhaustion in a job where profits are fluctuating and danger is relatively unpredictable.⁴⁰ ‘They are crazy, I tell you!’ she exclaimed on a Christmas Eve, commenting on her regulars’ gifts and marriage proposals. ‘I ask them: “are you rich? If you are, I’ll marry you.” They tell me I’m crazy, but love passes through one’s belly, doesn’t it?’

³⁹ It would be interesting for future research to investigate where, why and how the bifurcation between legal jobs in erotic entertainment and unprotected ones on the street occurs.

⁴⁰ Like most street sex workers who reside and work in the same city for quite some time, Stefania works almost exclusively with regulars. Her customer selection entails giving up part of the earnings she could make if she accepted just anyone. I consistently saw her making this choice whenever we stopped to talk to her during night patrols. However, such a choice remarkably decreases the risk of being exposed to physical harm at the hands of a ‘customer’. Nevertheless, she is exposed to other dangers, such as robbery; a risk that is intensified for street sex workers, as they are forced into peripheral, industrial and under inhabited areas.

Arguably, for supporters of ‘separate spheres and hostile worlds view’ (Zelizer 2005: 20), Stefania’s depiction of love as dependent on a person’s capacity to provide economically for her is outrageous. However, ‘no household lasts long without extensive economic interaction among its members’ (*ibid.*: 41), and love can bind one to work more, as Stefania’s responsibilities for her family members show.

Many of the migrant, Eastern European women I encountered during night patrols reported moving between Italy and their homelands frequently, and on and off street sex work respectively. According to Andrea Morniroli, who is responsible for projects on ‘trafficking, prostitution and urban marginality’ for the Dedalus organisation (Rivista delle politiche sociali 2015),⁴¹ there is an emerging bracket of seasonal migrant sex workers, who move across national boundaries according to their needs (Morniroli, 2013). Arguably, such needs also entail those of their dependants, who, like Stefania, they help to maintain through a stigmatised job. All throughout, as observed by Laura Oso Casas in relation to Latin American sex workers in Spain, love simultaneously ties migrant women sex workers to both their home country and their (sex) work far away from home, wherein remittances transmit love (Casas, 2010: 53). In her discussion of similarly circular migration patterns by cabaret dancers in Switzerland, Dahinden argued that ‘such economic and affective homeward bonds support the circulatory character of the dancer’s mobility pattern’ (Dahinden, 2010: 333; see also Parreñas, 2010 on Filipina entertainers in Japan).

Rutvika Andrijasevic, in her study on non-EU Eastern European women working in Italy in third party controlled street prostitution, observed that by stressing their economic need (vs. gain), the sacrifices endured to care for their distant dependents (parents and/or children) and their motherhood role, women voiced a subject position through which they could resist the multi-faceted stigma they experience as whores and/or victims (i.e. prostituted) (2010: 113-118). She also observed that disavowing the whore stigma often entailed

⁴¹ It is a social cooperative established in 1981 in Naples which runs projects on social exclusion and local development (Dedalus cooperativa sociale).

passing it on to another feminine abject, as they identified ‘other women as “whores” and themselves as not-prostitutes’ (*ibid.*: 113); a finding consistent with the othering processes underlying the position of the respectable feminine subject discussed throughout this dissertation. Similar findings were observed by scholars researching erotic and sex work in analogous migratory contexts (see for example: Bott, 2006: 38-39; Dahinden, 2010: 338), or highlighted in the analysis of class- based competition dynamics among workers in domestic sex markets (see for example: Rivers-Moore, 2013: 163; Robillard, 2010: 538).

On my night patrols, I similarly observed that – however rushed our interaction – the majority of women street sex workers stressed their diminishing earnings, the sacrifices they endured for their distant dependants’ well-being, and a general lack of decent jobs in their home country and/or Italy. Part of this emphasis reflected an anticipated reaction to the stigma they knew to be enwrapped in through their job. As shown in Chapter 4, migrant women and M2F street sex workers are the social group most abjectified by the Italian nation state. I frequently heard, especially from new arrivals, expressions of despise for themselves at being ‘whores’. At the same time, by being there, they were simultaneously affirming the will to refuse the fate of victimhood and their however cruel attachments to their dreams of living a normal life.

Pride emerged clearly in conversations with women more familiar with the association for which I volunteered,⁴² and with whom we engaged in deeper conversations. ‘You know the hazards when you start this job,’ Natalia said when I expressed concern for her continuous weight loss, ‘but I don’t want to stop before I realise my dreams: buy a house and open a shop back home.’ After rejecting several potential customers, who had stopped their cars behind our van, she said goodbye when one of her regulars arrived. As we left, my colleague recounted that several years ago, when Natalia first arrived in Italy, she had been trafficked. She had managed to escape from her pimps and return to her home country, but could not find a good job there, so eventually decided to return to Italy and work on the streets autonomously in pursuit of her dreams.

⁴² I described the association in Chapter 1 (section: ‘Street-based and indoor sex workers’).

Part of this pride could entail the refusal to take up the racialised, respectable feminine other of the figure of the 'migrant whore' – i.e. the 'migrant badante (care worker)'. In Italy, the demand for cheap care, erotic and sex work has been steadily growing since the 1990s, and migrant women are increasingly taking on these jobs.⁴³ My fieldwork observation confirms that domestic and care work were the only alternatives that migrant women street sex workers considered accessible.

Norina is a Romanian woman in her fifties who, approximately ten years ago, left for Italy to sell sex after the death of her husband, as she and her two children were left penniless. 'I could work as a badante,' she said thoughtfully, 'but she can't, she's too young.' With this last comment, Norina indicated at the young woman sitting on a concrete block next to her.⁴⁴ Norina also did not work as a badante, but did not say why.

Ukrainian but holding a Spanish passport, Ulla lost her job as a chef in Spain. Divorced and with a son in higher education, she migrated to Italy to work as a live-in carer for an elderly couple, whose working daughter Ulla also helped by managing her kids. However, the wage she earns is too little to contribute to her son's maintenance; hence, during her weekly free night, she often goes out to sell sex on a street several kilometres from her workplace, which is also her lodging.

⁴³ In Chapter 4, I discussed the transformation of street sex work from the 1990s onwards. As for care work, Italy's need for cheap, private care intersects with, and fosters, its economy's reliance on informal – i.e. cheaper and unprotected – employment. Between the 1990 and 1995 amnesties, 'possession of a labour contract as a full-time housekeeper was the only way to enter Italy, except for temporary tourist and student visa', and obtaining such a contract often became a way to 'regularize one's legal status while remaining in work in the informal sector' (Mingione & Quassoli, 2000: 51). Over time, the government's fixed share of care work permits increased in relation to the total number of total permits, despite the ruling right-wing, xenophobic political coalition's rhetoric on zero-tolerance (see for example, the Minister of Interior Roberto Maroni, Northern League quot. in Fontana, 2008). In the absence of sufficient work permits in other employment sectors (e.g. construction, factory work, etc.), even today many migrant men enter with a domestic work contract, and subsequently find a job in domains where legal work permits are (made) unavailable (see for example: Pinotti, 2014; Rosini, 2011).

⁴⁴ I did not investigate the reasons for this age bias. My impression is that an expectation exists that older women know how best to care for dependants, while there is fear that younger women migrants might upset the emotional and/or economic balance of the employing family, due to widespread racialised stigma I discussed in Chapter 4.

'Sincerely, I don't like working as a badante', replied Nunzia, a young Nicaraguan woman, to a colleague in patrol with me who asked if she considered leaving street sex work. 'To be locked inside all day long, every day?' she continued, visibly disturbed at the thought, 'And the pay is too little: nine hundred Euros a month! Ok they give you food but....it's too bad to be locked, and they take advantage of you.' Nunzia's statement was daring and uniquely straightforward: even if she had the opportunity to do what the society considers a more respectable job, she would still prefer selling sex. It also confirms that for most migrant women the choice of employment in Italy is narrowed to sex and care jobs. Analogously, several migrant M2F street sex workers recounted first obtaining the legal permit to stay in Western Europe either through marriage with an Italian, or Western European man - and often Spanish, especially for South American M2F transgender migrants - or a contract as a care worker.

Such constraints holds true also if vice versa they are analyzed from the perspective of migrant women working in domestic and care work. 'Fifteen years ago, there was the Italian boom', Kate recounted when asked what led her to move to Italy.

In Ukraine everyone came here, especially women, to do cleaning, baby-sitting, etc. My mother went to Milan first, and she was ok because she ended up with a wealthy family, who wanted her to work every day at their home! As a domestic worker, really: cooking, washing, staying with the kids....She was fine, but my mother is a family lover too, and she couldn't wait to make me come and stay here. Now she's ok.

Kate's mother is a doctor and had her own medical studio in Ukraine but earned too little. Her husband was reportedly idle and, although migration led to their divorce, 'even before they did not get along very well.' Possibly, marital strain contributed to Kate's mother's decision to migrate alone. 'She was brave,' I said, visualising my own mother in her place - i.e. leaving for a country she knew nothing about, not speaking the language, and feeling guilt for leaving her adolescent daughter. 'Totally,' she said proudly, 'She knew nothing. She had nowhere to go, she did not know what to do.' 'But didn't she have any friends or contacts in Italy?' I asked, figuring a migration chain model.

There was a girl who was supposed to help her, but she could not find her. Really, she went through hard times. She slept on the floor in a room with twenty other women. She ate at Caritas.⁴⁵ In the beginning it was hard. Some chose the easier way and went to prostitute themselves, but my mother would have never done it. Little by little, she built a new life.

In Kate's eyes, selling sex was the 'easier way' for newly arrived migrant women in Italy. The next most viable alternative was to work for Italian families as a domestic worker, which is what her mother managed to do. Notwithstanding her qualification and professional track record, 'to work here as a family doctor, she'd have to study two years more, so she gave it up.' In the new life Kate's mother built in Italy, there is her daughter, a good relationship with her Italian husband, and a job as a care professional in a public hospital. 'It's now been three or five years that she works as a nurse. It's a good job, well paid, thank God it's a long term contract', Kate said, relieved at her mother's settlement her over-qualification notwithstanding.

As has become evident, taking a despised job in the erotic/sex market or a respectable but poorly paid care job constitute, by and large, the most readily and almost exclusive employability options available for migrant women in Italy. Sex, care, love and work are intrinsically part of women's and M2F transgenders' migration routes West-ward. Their work and intimate spheres are deeply entangled and help to sustain one another by providing necessary economic means for the welfare of dependents, and the emotional support necessary to bear multiple work-borne constraints, including gendered and racialised stigmas.

However tactical, articulating boundaries between work and intimacy puts a ceiling on the time and labour (erotic and sex) workers invest in their paid work, leaving time to cultivate their intimate relationships outside of it. As I will show in the next section, such tactical, flexible, nuanced boundary-making capacity emerges clearly from the tales of Italian sex workers who work autonomously in their homes, or as free lancers in countries where the sale of sex is legal.

⁴⁵ It is a charitable association belonging to the Catholic Church (Caritas 2015).

Managing affective boundaries

Kyla is an Italian sex worker in her late forties, who works from her home. Sitting in her pink-painted kitchen, immersed in the silence of her neighbourhood, which stands next to abandoned train tracks, I was captivated by Kyla's tales. 'Don't be scared!' she said, laughing when I jumped at a light but unexpected puff.

It's just an air freshener! They're everyone's terror! I have one in each room. They mark the time when I'm with a man, each half an hour. It's crafty, because you never work with the clock, it's a sign of disdain...

Part of Kyla's work and fee entails performing a kaleidoscope of feminine roles to relationally produce her customers' masculinity: desiring them, being sexually available and caring for them. 'I've learnt to smile first, be an absolute slut during – because that's what they want – and be buttery sweet after', she said, describing her average male customer. Reassurance of being authentically desired (when the encounter is premised on customers' availability to pay Kyla for staging it), sexual pleasures, and a final cuddle to show that however space-bounded, their encounter was mutually enjoyable: it is all of these pleasures that Kyla's customers, on average, reportedly seek.' Out of this three-act performance, 'mainly, mainly what they want is to be cuddled. Sexual intercourse is very rapid.'

A crucial element of Kyla's service entails concealing the catalyst of their encounter – i.e. the money they pay her to stage this performance of 'bounded intimacy' (Bernstein 2007b). Hence, the air freshener is a tool she uses to discretely manage time with a customer. I was not a customer, however, and the sound of a tool used to mark work time arguably hinted at an encroachment of work on her intimate sphere. Yet, most of us live amidst a number of objects that constantly remind us of the passage of time (e.g. alarm clocks, wrist watches, Smart phones, computers, etc.), as well as marking the alternation between work and leisure time. I have none of these objects on me and only a few in my home, which is where, like Kyla and Ulla, I work. Since I can remember, however, it has been the bells of the local Catholic parish that have marked the time for me: ringing each half an hour, calling for Sunday Mass and

religious festivities, and notifying of funerals. However loud and invasive, I rarely hear the bells ringing; when I wish to know the time, I look at an electronic appliance screen. My selective hearing is not exceptional, and the sound of Kyla's air fresher was much softer than the bells ringing a hundred metres from my home. Whether she counted the puffs spent in my company or not, she graciously gave me and my research her entire morning, even though I had only asked for one hour of her time. 'How much do you work in a week?' I asked her. 'As much as I need. If I worked on the basis of the requests I receive, I think I'd make money, but I'm not bound to it,' she stressed, explaining who among her friends and regulars gave her the few expensive items scattered around her kitchen. 'I have all the time I want and this is my luxury. Few people have time. I have no-one telling me 'no' to any of my life plans', she continued, stretching her arms wide as if expressing her freedom. 'It's cool. Cool. You too? You don't have any ball stuck to your feet, do you?' she asked jokingly, knowing I was not engaged in an intimate relation. I nodded 'yes'; for better or worse, I was indeed free from such bonds, and I knew how valuable was her prized freedom: time.

The pleasantness of the affects that Kyla produces in her relational engagement with customers is such that many reportedly forget they are bound to a tariff:

It happens frequently, to meet someone who loses his mind because he has with me what he doesn't have with her [wife or girlfriend]...But whenever I hear the bells ringing, I put a halt. [...] When customers come the first time it's ok, the second time ok, but by the third time you start to understand that there's something else. Maybe they leave you some extra money, a perfume, send roses, and you say: 'what the fuck! I don't want these things.' They call you in the evening: 'I was thinking about you.' What the fuck! I want to see the Simpsons, I have my cartoons, I don't want to...but yes, they fall in love. But it's because they talk, talk, talk and I'm what they all would like or used to have...

The male customers deluded into thinking they are lovers were not the only type Kyla spoke about, however. There were also a few she felt bonded to through a sense of familiarity and friendship. However rarely, she also encountered customers who dangerously transgressed the spatial boundaries of

their negotiated intimacy.⁴⁶ Those she described were reportedly the most frequent types: men unable or unwilling to engage in the effortful, daily, reciprocal relational work sustaining the circuits of affectivity with their partners, but who yearned for it so much that they paid someone to perform and forget they had done so.

‘Do you want to see my bedroom? My office?’ Kyla asked, suddenly standing up while recounting her customer reviews from an online forum.⁴⁷ I followed her to the room that is, at specific times during the week, simultaneously an office for her and a space of pleasure for her customers. When she opened the door, I felt I was stepping into an exotic space: there were a few candles placed on a majestic but simple olive wood chest of drawers and a four-post wooden bed with a white mosquito net tied to its sides; everything evoked the sensuality of a Mediterranean summer night.⁴⁸ As Kyla guided me to look at some objects steeped in her intimate ties, she invited me to feel the mattress she slept and sometimes worked on. As I did it, I found myself encircled by my own image, which was reflected in mirrors scattered all over the room. ‘They accelerate orgasm’, she said when I noticed this multiplier effect aloud. Kyla explained:

The only thing I ask when I’m naked and on top of them [male customers] is: “Will you let yourself be kissed?” This is something that you always need to ask, because a man does not necessarily enjoy kissing; maybe he enjoys everything but the kiss.

‘Yeah, I understand. I myself often don’t feel like kissing either if it’s just about sex’, I said absent-mindedly, expecting her – i.e. a woman – to naturally share the boundaries between love and sex I was raised to believe. In such, ‘kissing’ is attributed a uniquely intimate meaning, making it incompatible with its performance for money. Similarly, Anne Phillips posited that sex workers’ emotional management was wearing as she observed that they ‘often refuse to

⁴⁶ For example, she recounted that a customer once removed the condom; she had to be physically imposing to continue the encounter according to her rules. Another time, a customer rang her doorbell drunk at night, asking for a paid encounter on the spot, and she had to pretend she was not alone for him to leave.

⁴⁷ There are several forums where sex workers’ customers review the services consumed, judging whether the quality and type matched what advertised, including the workers’ aesthetics. The forum I consulted as a sample is called Escort Forum (*ibid.*).

⁴⁸ I discussed Mediterraneity and exotic value in Chapter 4.

permit clients to kiss them' in order to cope with their work-induced emotional burden' (2013: 150). At the same time, our cultural association with kissing as an act of utmost intimacy is strengthened by the endless movies and TV productions we pay to watch; in such, professional actors are paid to perform kissing and other intimate acts for our consumption and pleasure. 'No, no, my dear,' Kyla said, promptly correcting me:

a kiss is a way to accelerate a man's orgasm! Because if you look at him in a certain way, you captivate him [...] and when you give him a kiss in a certain way (and anyway I never kiss a customer the way I kiss the one I love), then you promptly hear the typical sentence 'no, no, stop, stop'...so you go faster, 'yes, yes!' And it's over.

However one perceives such an instrumental description of an act many exclusively associate with love and romance, customers who review Kyla's services – which can include, consensual kissing – find them pleasurable, and Kyla knows how differently she kisses 'the one' she loves.

In the spatial overlapping of her workplace and home, of an act she performs for money and an only apparently similar act she exchanges with her partner, Kyla's boundaries between her work and herself are invisible but felt. They arise out of the different affects produced through, and circulating amidst, Kyla and her customers, Kyla and her significant others. Some of these boundaries are drawn on her skin. 'I carry all the people I love on my skin. All of them', she stated, recounting the meaning of the tattoos covering her body from head to toe. 'Here's my colleague,' she said, showing a tattoo of a woman on her thigh, 'and this is her husband – a biomechanical spider – she's not safe with him, but she's on me and I always take her along.' 'Here are my sons' she said, showing two names on the back of her hands. Skin piece after skin piece, Kyla continued to tell me what each drawing meant and reminded her of: bonds, dreams, fears, loves, weaknesses. 'These two female demons are my fears', she said, lifting the back of her shirt, 'and I'm the siren amidst them: sensual and free. She has wings and arms wide open, as if shooing fears away.' Thin and thick, immaterial and embodied, it is this affective texture that Kyla proudly wears every day. Yet, even to herself, its meanings are multiple and shifting: it can be a boundary

shielding her from customers, a fidelity statement to her loved ones, a cuddle to her worries, an aspiration to freedom and many more, all at once.

'Did your work ever negatively affect your personal life?' I asked Kyla hesitantly. We both knew that this question was not only one of the most intimately bonded to stigmas on sex work, but also one to which there seems to be no right answers, as the shifting and contradictory subject positions voiced by the women in this chapter showed. That was the only moment I felt Kyla stiffen up and dry her answers to the bone. 'No', she said. 'Do you manage to keep separate...' I tried reformulating, but again she stopped me short. 'Yes', she said. 'Don't you ever feel disgust for men? I feel it, for example, when I find out that a man hanging out with me is actually cheating on his partner', I insisted, drawing from my personal experiences to level the power relations embedded in the researcher/researched binary. 'Oh yes', she replied, eased at my field entry,

men are really poor. I don't feel disgust but...pity, because they need this or that [she indicated to her sexual orifices] to feel like men. Whereas us women, we don't need to fuck. I swear, I don't feel that need.⁴⁹

'Thanks for telling me,' I said, 'sometimes, if I say that I'm not desperate for sex, I feel that I'm wrong. There are periods that I really don't...' I confessed, confident that she would not judge me for my emotional detachment from sex. 'Periods? Months! If it wasn't that I'm living on it!' she exclaimed, 'and anyway I never climax with a customer. Never. Maybe once, by chance. It never happens.' Three years after our interview, Kyla and I are still in contact. Shortly after our first meeting, she met a young man at a street theatre performance and they fell crazily in love; they continue to be. Meanwhile, they also both continue doing their jobs independently and transparently, each living in his/her own flat. My intimate sphere, on the other hand, did not change as dramatically.

Kyla described enforcing a neat separation between her customers' pleasure, her time-bound attendance to them, and her own pleasure, but this is not the only work approach I encountered during my research. Approximately twenty

⁴⁹ Here, Kyla is also hinting at the performative anxieties which are intrinsic to the position of 'man' in heteronormativity, as cogently argued by Lauren Berlant (2012).

years younger, Roberta was pursuing a highly flexible work trajectory, which included multiple short-term jobs (e.g. brothel employment, escorting, porn movie acting, etc.) in different Western European countries according to their prostitution legislation. In my eyes, Roberta's boundaries between her intimate and work spheres seemed to be excessively thin. In the two years since we first met, she frequently recounted falling for men she met at work (e.g. customers she performed the time-bound girlfriend for, or the owners of sexy shops) and suffering when the relationship ended, which often coincided with the end of the negotiated services. Yet, at the same time, she gave me several examples of how she ordinarily enforced boundaries with customers attempting to get more for the same price, such as getting her drunk:

Clearly they do it on purpose, but I always pay attention not to go beyond a certain limit, because afterwards you can mess up and be completely condescending with customers, whom instead you always need to keep at bay.

Another time, commenting on the old age of many of her customers, Roberta said: 'you never have to be moved to pity. Work is work.' However, it is possible that the conditions attached to her flexible employment contracts leave Roberta less room than Kyla to adjust work to her needs and interests. 'As soon as I close my eyes, I only see dicks', she said after ending a three week contract in a Swiss oral-sex only brothel, 'I feel like going around with a scalpel. I need to detoxify. And then I always perceive a male smell on me.' Once, when I greeted her for May Day, she laughed bitterly and asked: 'include ours [sex work] in the arduous works' category!'

Finally, the experience of Ursula, an Italian woman in her early forties who worked as a BDSM slave, illustrates sex workers' capacity to not only mould the borders between work and intimacy, sparing the latter from the former's encroachment, but also to use work as a space to actively mould one's subjectivity.

I interviewed Ursula in her home – a cosy basement, with no sunlight, that she decorated with her own paintings and shelves of books on arts and politics – where for five years, she received customers who bought time to dominate her

physically, sexually and/or emotionally. 'I slowed down when I was found by the woman who, in this period, is somehow maintaining me,' she said, 'we have a lesbian relationship.' Her partner is a rich financial trader married to an equally rich yet older husband with whom she continues living in fear of coming out as a lesbian. As the economically wealthier party in the relationship, she contributes financially to Ursula's livelihood. Meanwhile, for Ursula this is a significant but not exclusive relationship amidst a wider web of intimates:

A relationship with one person only is heavy! It is highly alienating. Even from the point of view of love, I maintain different reference points. I have a male partner, I have another friend with whom I do other things, and I also see this woman. [...] And when I feel the desire, I continue practicing [BDSM], but not as before. I only do it with people who became friends.

In the extract above, Ursula states that she became friends with men whom she occasionally enjoyed being dominated by.⁵⁰ Hence, her experience confirms that although bounded by and to the payment of a tariff, the affects produced through erotic and sex work are not intrinsically at odds with authenticity – for neither customers nor sex workers (see for example: Doezenia, 2013; Sagar et al., 2015: 25). 'I feel like you truly enjoyed your work' I told her, as the interview she initially resented turned into a conversation she enjoyed so much that we lost track of time. 'It doesn't seem that you enabled others to..."use" you?' I asked her hesitantly, mindful that this question is loaded with stigmatising assumptions.

Well, I'd say I was a bad prostitute indeed! A prostitute ought to lift the skirt, jump on top and fuck, right? But I took it differently. The world I discovered moved me. I mean: you receive men in miserable, disarming human conditions; they have sexual problems, erection problems, some can't hold on to the condom...people who only need someone to talk with [...] So at the end, I shared my knowledge and I did it therapeutically, both for me and the others. Because essentially, those who want to fuck are just a few. All the others look for something they lack in their alienated world and family life.

Similar to Lina, Mimì, and many other women whose voices I reported throughout this Chapter, Ursula reclaims her work's healing properties for her

⁵⁰ Pleasure and BDSM sex in intimate relationships contributed to igniting the feminist sex wars (Rubin, 2010), however a thorough discussion of this is beyond the scope of my dissertation.

male customers, who are struggling to cope with the performative requirements of hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005: 852).⁵¹ Such discussion is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but I wanted to understand in what sense Ursula's job was 'therapeutic' for her. She replied:

To me, it was also⁵² an experiment I did to understand my relationship with pain, with passivity. Women continue to receive an oppressive education, so you don't know when passivity is what you need or when it's an attitude you're socialised into [...] Eventually, I got out of it. I speak like a junkie, don't I?! But it's because I don't consider myself a slave. I accepted that I am also dominant. I was in conflict with the idea of domination because, in my eyes, it overlapped with male power, as if it entailed mimicking them, their schemes and clichés. But now I reconciled myself with this. I can now say 'yes' or 'no' consciously.

Ursula's attempt to test the boundaries of her (feminised) passivity represents a way to pursue a subjectivity that transcends a gender polarity that juxtaposes masculinity, agency and desire on one side, and femininity, objectification and passivity on the other (Benjamin, 1990: 74-79).⁵³ Her healing entailed feeling both the desire to resist her (feminised) passivity and the desire to dominate, thereby indirectly challenging radical feminists' homogeneous representation of women sex workers as victims of male oppressors.

As the boundaries between researcher and researched, myself and Ursula, continued to blur and she let go of the urgency to respond to anticipated stigmas, some of the pain she endured in transcending the boundaries of her gendered subjectification arose. 'You too are a tough one!' she exclaimed, after I recounted my own personal journey to and back from war-torn countries, into a research that brought me to explore and loose the boundaries between myself and many others. 'Intense,' she continued, 'it must be a peculiarity of yours. A

⁵¹ Also Kyla, who occasionally works as a BDSM mistress, reported similar experiences: 'I'm a person who frightens, who orders without being touched, forcing [customers] psychologically. And this amuses me a lot, but I don't do it often because it drains so much energy out of me. I feel sorry for the one who's under because I see their frustration, and normally these are very, very rich people who lead a life in command and want to be commanded by and in the worst ways. Believe me.'

⁵² Ursula started selling sex to pay her rent, but her choice to perform the BDSM slave specifically stemmed from her decision to explore her own subjectification beyond gender polarity.

⁵³ I discussed such gender polarity in Chapter 2, in relation to feminist debates on women's sexual objectification/empowerment, and the goal of autonomy.

beautiful one.’ ‘Yes, but also painful’, I said. ‘Yes, because you deal with people’s pain. Also prostitution experiences are not without life consequences, or on the concept of [romantic] love. They open up many ideas.’

As highlighted in my discussion of positionality in Chapter 1, in the course of writing this dissertation I became aware of some of the processes affecting my own heteronormative subjectification. I saw this unfolding, similar to the women I interviewed, under Damocles’ swinging sword of the whore and objectification stigmas. As I discuss in the next and concluding section, I also came to acknowledge my own alienation from my feelings, learnt throughout the many years I worked as a white Western aid worker in war-torn countries. Such awareness further awakened me to the cultural construction of the supposedly neat separation between work and intimacy, and eventually helped highlight the role of class and race in shaping notions of acceptable degrees and types of work-borne pain.

To feel or not to feel? The respectable borders of pain

As most women I interviewed and encountered during fieldwork, Zara, an Italian pole dance teacher and performer in her early twenties, was wary of the stigmatising assumptions potentially underlying my research goals. As anticipated at the end of Chapter 2, when we met for the interview Zara started by querying my background and reasons for this research. ‘At university I studied social sciences,’ she said, enraptured by my tale of my past as a gender and development expert in war-torn countries,

and I made an internship at UNICEF Headquarters in Rome – by the way, [it was] outrageous, everything was new, super cool [...] Anyway. We addressed the theme of street children and women’s situation in Kinshasa [Democratic Republic of Congo]. Every time we spoke about it I cried, I swear, especially for women’s condition, I had tears this big. I felt it so close to me, I could have been in their place if I was born there and not here...I really don’t know how you did it, you must have a heart this big...

‘Or maybe I have a heart of stone!’ I exclaimed sarcastically, trying to unsettle my idealization. ‘Ok, it’s true: when I started, I used to react like that. It hurts,’ I said, remembering how hard it was to un-learn feeling pain and how ashamed I

felt after in the eyes of big hearted young women like her, 'but you can't fix the evils of the world alone, right? You have to come to terms with it, or you can't work.'

Selfless caring is a core attribute of respectable femininity (Skeggs, 1997: 41) and the paradigmatic affect of woman accepting her 'lack of subjectivity' (Benjamin, 1990: 78). But I was paid to care for the others, 'and ain't I a woman?' (Truth, 1851).

'Uhm, I see...it's like doctors, you cry over the first corpse and then, after the thousandth...' Zara said, a bit disillusioned. 'Yes, you have to learn,' I said coldly, 'like psychologists do, and other jobs like that.'

Can rage and impotence in the face of injustice cause intimate injury? What is the everyday violence we unlearn to feel? Where do we draw the boundaries of acceptability of pain? Whose pain is respectable? Who decides what price is worth paying for an extra dose? And who can afford not to (feel it)?

As I write this concluding chapter, the EU's borders are littered with the corpses of men, women, and children escaping war-torn countries, but exclusionary migration policies are preventing them from crossing over (see for example: Reuters, 2015; Rangeri, 2015). However dire their working and living conditions, the migrant women erotic and sex workers I met, interviewed and whose voices I recorded and reported throughout my research, are alive, pursuing their dreams of living a normal life in the face of different types and degrees of gendered and racialised mobility and employability constraints. Whether stigmatised as whores or praised as cheap carers, to be here conveys their resistance to an unwanted fate. Their determination attests to 'the centrality of optimistic fantasy to surviving in zones of compromised ordinariness', and at the same time conveys 'the impasse of living in the overwhelmingly present moment' (Berlant, 2010b: 116).

My own experience as an aid worker attests, instead, to how alienation and defensive boundary-making are not exclusive to erotic/sex work; these mechanisms also pertain to so-called respectable jobs, such as the aid worker. I

am not saying the pain is the same, I am simply asking what is more unacceptably painful to whom and when. Therefore, I contend that the objectives for which it is worth feeling or unlearning to feel pain at work are subjective and inflected by one's class and racialised positioning.

Conclusions

In this chapter, I discussed the tensions characterising women's heteronormative subjectification, as articulated by women whose job entails taking up the position of the whore – i.e. a woman who is simultaneously highly desired and despised for her sexuality. I began by showing how women erotic and sex workers experience their work as both financially rewarding and direly stigmatised, and their work persona as powerful, desirable and intensely despised. Their narratives, hence, put forward the ambivalence of pleasure and pain, power and shame, which affects their subjectification, outside the sexual objectification/empowerment, dependence/autonomy binaries, which I discussed in Chapter 2.

Amidst such contradictory experiences and feelings, women erotic/sex workers' shifting subject positions – between the entrepreneur of one's erotic capital and the sacrificial mother or daughter; between nostalgia for romantic love and pride in economic self-sufficiency; between chastity claims and othering women who sell sex acts or are unfaithful to love – convey the forcefulness of the intersecting, multifaceted stigmas they experience at and due to their work. Such forcefulness also underlies workers' tactical articulation of metaphors of separation between themselves and their work, their body and their image. As scholars researching sex work stress, improving erotic and sex workers' working conditions is key to sustain their ability to cope with work-borne burdens, and erasing the associated stigma is part of this struggle (Chapkis, 1997: 52; TAMPEP International Foundation, 2015).

I also showed that, due to the relationality intrinsic to their jobs, erotic and sex workers' boundary-making tactics can clash with customers or third parties' feelings, desires and/or assumptions – myself included. Sometimes, regulars (attempt to) forget that such pleasurable affects are the result of consuming a

time- and space-bound service. More rarely, although importantly, workers experience the relation with their customers as mutually pleasurable, sometimes leading to a consensual modification of its meaning for both parties. Such pliability of boundaries does not indicate workers' loss of control – given that, as most work skills, learning processes also entail trial and error – but rather workers' capacity to mould boundaries according to what they deem best.

Finally, consistent with Zelizer's notion of 'connected lives' (2005), I argued that the normative separation between market and intimacy, which is at the core of the stigma on prostitution, is a social construction that engenders a particular viewpoint; a viewpoint significantly inflected by one's class and racialised positioning. Radical feminists hold just such a position, as they argue that prostitution engenders a uniquely dire experience of work-borne alienation, reflecting Western women's prioritization of gender versus other axis of inequality, such as class and race.

In a scenario characterised by rising economic precarity, inequalities within and across nations, and racialised and gendered mobility and employability patterns, I argued that women's engagement in erotic/sex work must be understood within the broader sphere of personal aspirations and affectivity. Indeed, each of this chapter's protagonists revealed the work and effort involved in pursuing dreams of normality. In pursuing this dream, each faced different types and degrees of constraints, which in turn entailed the investment of different blends of sex, care and love into their work. However stigmatised as whores or cheap carers, women erotic/sex workers expressed various reasons for being proud, as they were unwilling to paint themselves as victims of fate.

Chapter 6. Conclusions

Feminist scholarship debating sexualisation and prostitution/sex work mainly discusses women's sexuality from within a heteronormative framework, by highlighting whether it challenges or reproduces women's subordination using a set of dichotomies juxtaposing objectification and empowerment, dependence and autonomy, oppression and liberation, victimisation and choice. In contrast, this dissertation is premised on the idea that the prioritisation of gender over other axes of difference, and ensuing power-laden hierarchies, reflects the privileged positioning of Western women and second wave feminists (Yeğenoğlu 1998; Mohanty 1988), artificially downplaying the significance of class and race in women's subjectivities.

This dissertation's first argument posits that the radical feminist and abolitionist position on prostitution/sex work – i.e. that prostitution constitutes a gendered and therefore uniquely dire and unacceptable form of work-induced alienation (Pateman 1988; MacKinnon 2011) – encapsulates and reproduces the class-based and racialised positioning of white Western women and their moral-laden hierarchies of un/worthy pleasures and pain. Focusing on the interplay of gender with other axes of power and inequality, therefore, I analysed women's sexuality at the intersection of the promise of pleasure attached to consumption, which fuels contemporary capitalism (Appadurai 1996: 82-83), and increasing economic precarity and inequality within and across (nation) states (Berlant 2010a; Singer 2014; Piketty 2014). In a persistently heteronormative context, where women's subjectification is heavily constrained by the mutually exclusive roles of the wife and the whore, I showed how women often negotiate their use of sexuality as a socioeconomic asset by evoking the symbolic protection encapsulated by the position of the respectable feminine subject. At the same time, such positioning is contingent upon the disavowal of their feminine other, i.e. the whore, and the ensuing othering process is affected by, and reproduces, hierarchies of value and worth among women that are inflected by class and race. Women's agency in pursuit of their dreams of social and/or spatial mobility, and/or to fulfil their emotional and economic responsibilities for dependents, unfolds within spaces characterized by gendered and racialised mobility constraints and employability patterns

(Brah 1993; 1993b; Agustín, 2007: 53; Andrijasevic 2010: 74). Yet, Italian and migrant women erotic and sex workers articulated many reasons why their job was meaningful, and refused to be stigmatised as objects devoid of agency, as radical feminists and abolitionists contend (MacKinnon 2011).

The second argument of this dissertation challenges radical feminists and abolitionists' heteronormative biases, and their analysis that prostitution is a gendered activity premised on, and reproducing, a neat binary between male oppressors and women victims (Pateman 1988; MacKinnon 2011). Instead, I looked at how states' disciplining of prostitution/sex work also contributes to reproducing heteronormativity, thereby expanding the analytical framework to include the legal and moral disciplining of marriage and homosexuality by state and religious establishments. In this regard, the contemporary Italian context is exemplary, as this country hosts the global seat of the Catholic Church - which still disciplines marriage as an indissoluble, divine contract - and maintains a standalone position in the EU in favour of a return to regulationism and against any recognition of same-sex unions. I contend that Italy's special, affective relation towards state-regulated prostitution, and the country's lingering nostalgia for the 'lost brothel', is a reflection of the Catholic Church's deeply engrained homophobia. In this vein, the meaning of prostitution shifts from that of a redeemable sin down a hierarchy of worst evils (Rossiaud 2013: 12) to a tool to cultivate men's heterosexual orientation, rooted in the 'taboo on homosexuality' (Rubin 1975: 180; Butler 1990: 87). The plurality and diversity of the actors selling and consuming commodified sex – including men and LGBTQI sex workers (Sagar et al., 2015: 35; Minchiello et al. 2012: 270), and women consumers of erotic and sexual services sold by both men (Gigolò 2015b) and women (Goldhill 2015) – makes a compelling case for expanding research on the regulation of prostitution/sex work outside its current heteronormative framework.

This dissertation's third argument is that dichotomies juxtaposing objectification and empowerment, dependence and autonomy, oppression and liberation reflect and engender a liberal understanding of the individual and

his/her agency (Mahmood 2001; Butler 1997). In fact, both the paradigm of women's 'internalized oppression' (Bartky 1990) and the feminist goal of autonomy (Pateman 2002) reproduce a normative ideal of the individual as self-contained, neatly separated from other(s). Acknowledging instead the intrinsic relationality of being subjects in this world (Benjamin 1990), which is weaved through desire (Moore 2007: 20; Berlant 2012), I highlighted the pleasures and vulnerabilities intrinsic to desirability, outlining the affective and existential value beyond its significance for gender relations of power.

Having synthesised my main arguments, I now describe how each chapter contributed to developing these lines of thought.

Women's subjectification amidst pleasure, stigma and desire

In **Chapter 1**, I illustrated the general and specific context framing this dissertation, the main scholarly debates it engages with, and the theoretical framework and methodology I used to undertake my research questions. I addressed the tensions underlying the processes of women's subjectification in contemporary Western countries within a heteronormative order characterised by an increasingly sexualised culture and an upsurge in the feminist sex wars. Here, women who capitalise on their 'erotic capital' (Hakim 2011) are ambivalently glamorised and stigmatised as whores and/or (more or less un/witting) sexual objects for male pleasure. In a context further characterised by increasing economic precarity (Berlant 2010a; Singer 2014), deepening inequalities within and across nations (Piketty 2014), and rising xenophobia (Ghosh 2011; Gunduz 2010), hierarchies among women on the basis of moral (un)worthiness and agency are further inflected by class and race. The Italian context constituted a particularly rich grounding for this research due to both the flare in popular indignation directed at women using their erotic capital, in the aftermath of Sexgate, and the persistent influence of the Catholic Church on the moral and legal disciplining of sexuality.

At the core of this dissertation was an analysis of the contemporary, fast-paced commercial boom in pole dancing in Italy, which I defined as a 'liminal' stage (Turner 1985) through which the tensions underlying the processes of women's

heteronormative subjectification became discernible. Within a rapidly expanding market, the assemblage of a discourse transforming an erotic dance into a leisure and fitness activity – i.e. from a dance performed by women stigmatised for their promiscuity and sexual objectification (i.e. lap dancers) into an activity appealing to middle-class women – touched the core norms disciplining women's use of their sexuality and ensuing hierarchies of worthiness. Pole dance entrepreneurs and teachers, most of whom first approached this practice as consumers, were frontline in the articulation of a marketing strategy holding together chastity and sexuality. This dissertation, hence, started by focusing on the emerging contradictions between women's public and private scripts, their pleasures and fears, as they sold and/or consumed a set of practices for the performance of a sexier femininity within a social and cultural context saturated with gendered stigmas.

In **Chapter 2**, I discussed the significance of the type of femininity sold by pole dance schools for the reproduction of heteronormativity. I showed how pole dance entrepreneurs and teachers consumed, sold and/or taught a pleasurable and profitable performance of femininity, promising women to heal injuries and insecurities about their heterosexual desirability. Yet, fearing stigmatisation for their display and use of sexuality, pole dance entrepreneurs and teachers publicly downplayed the practice's erotic connotations, instead emphasising its austere, sporty significance in an attempt to hold onto both the pleasure and power of heightened (hetero)sexual desirability and respectability. Some women enjoyed pole dancing also for the blend of gracefulness and physical strength it demanded, entailing a more or less subtle defiance of the gender binary, which attributes strength to men and (hegemonic) masculinity only. However, outside the homosocial context of the pole dance school, some felt sanctioned for failing (or risking to fail) standards of feminine embodiment, i.e. fragility, gracility, slenderness.

Within a social and cultural landscape where a practice originating from strip clubs is publicly advertised by emphasising its sporty austerity and domesticity (D'Amico 2014b), I argued that the meanings women invest in their display and

consumption of sexuality cannot be discussed along neat either/or binaries. To this end, I engaged with feminist scholarship debating women's subjectivities and agency along binaries of sexual objectification/empowerment and dependence on a desiring male audience/autonomy.

Firstly, I criticised the paradigm of women's internalised oppression (Bartky 1990), acknowledging its capacity to highlight the coercion intrinsic to current standards of feminine embodiment, but also the limitations of the neat self/other, woman-victim/man-oppressor binaries it relies on and reproduces. Cognizant of the 'paradox of subjection' (Butler 1997: 4), I first suggested that (women's) agency cannot be conceived within an either/or framework, as agency is inherently ambivalent (*ibid.*: 13). I then exposed the liberal biases underlying both the notion of agency as coterminous with resistance to oppression (Mahmood 2001: 206) and the feminist goal of autonomy. The latter, in fact, relies on a notion of the individual as self-governing (Pateman 2002), which denies the intrinsic relationality of being subjects in this world (Benjamin 1990); a relationality that is weaved and constantly reorganised through desire (Berlant 2012: 14). Moving beyond the dependence/autonomy dichotomy, and consistent with Mauss's theorisation of the role of gift practices in the texturing of social relations (1966: 10-11), I conceived of desire as a gift, thereby foregrounding desire's centrality in the relational constitution of the subject and the social (Moore 2007: 20).

Secondly, I engaged with feminist media and cultural studies' scholarship debating sexualisation in contemporary Western countries (for example: Gill & Donaghue 2013; McRobbie 2009). Such scholarship analyses leisure activities such as pole dancing mainly for their significance to the gendered oppression/liberation and sexual objectification/empowerment dichotomies. Significantly, these activities are defined as 'raunchy', following Ariel Levy's critique that contemporary culture is embedded with sexually objectified women heralded as role models for women (2006).

Throughout this dissertation, I highlighted the toxicity of current standards of feminine desirability and embodiment. Indeed, some women were distressed by

the daily, life-time work of self-beautification entailed in their performance (Butler 1990) of femininity, which only increases with aging – although such anxieties contribute to powering businesses such as pole dance schools. Meanwhile, other women expressed their pain at failing to comply with the ‘slender ideal’ (Bordo 1993). Yet, I argued that the coercion intrinsic to such standards should not lead to a rejection of the affective and existential value of desirability, but instead to its democratisation (Meyers 2002: 145-7): expanding the possibilities of feeling like desirable beings, which entails the desire to be the object of someone’s desire. Retrieving the affective and existential value of desirability, and the legitimacy of desiring to be desired, breaks with the view of woman’s position in heteronormativity as either passive and objectified (Benjamin, 1990: 74-79) or stigmatised as a whore for her sexuality (Pheterson 1993: 46).

Moving beyond the sexual objectification/empowerment, gendered oppression/liberation dichotomies, my concept of ‘pleasure’ acknowledges that women’s consumption of leisure activities such as pole dancing is infused with the pleasure of being recognised as a woman unashamed of publically showing her desire to be (hetero)sexually desirable, even in the eyes of an unrelated audience. However, in a country like Italy, where the hierarchy establishing women’s worth on the basis of sexuality (i.e. the wife/whore binary) is particularly forceful, such activities bear high risk of stigmatisation for the women involved. Hence, anticipating the risk of being stigmatised as whores and/or (un)witting sexual objects for male pleasure, pole dance entrepreneurs and teachers negotiated their consumption and/or sale of pole dancing through chastity claims (e.g. emphasising the practice’s sporty connotation over the erotic), articulating their position as respectable feminine subjects.

Marginally discussed in feminist media and cultural studies’ scholarship debating sexualisation in contemporary Western countries, the gendered, sexualised, class-based and racialised processes of othering that enable the construction of the respectable feminine subject (Skeggs 1997; Mosse 1996; McClintock 1995) constituted the backbones of **Chapters 3 and 4** of this

dissertation. Therefore, to unravel the contradictory tensions underlying women's heteronormative subjectification within the mutually exclusive roles of the wife and whore, I enlarged the analytical field to include Italian and migrant women and M2F transgenders whose job requires they take up this latter position, i.e. erotic and sex workers. Hence, I moved outside the homosocial space of the pole dance school, and across a number of spaces where the borders between sexualised leisure and work blurred along a continuum reflecting the class and racial identities of the women: discos, night clubs, street and indoor sex work. By interweaving class, race and sexuality in my analysis of women's articulation of their subjectivities, I gauged the weight of economic precarity, inequality and racism on their agency and unravelled the dialectics between heteronormativity and homophobia.

Class and women's subjectivities: sexuality between pleasure and work

In **Chapter 3** I discussed women's articulation of their position as respectable feminine subjects in relation to symbolic processes of social class dis/identification (Skeggs 1997) and 'distinction' (Bourdieu 1984). I began by showing how pole dance entrepreneurs and teachers negotiated their consumption and sale of a sexier and bolder femininity through markers of middle class respectability, blending virtue and pleasure (Bernstein 2007a: 477; Bourdieu 1984: 367). Women highlighted the sacrifices and bruises they endure to excel at this practice (also their work) in contrast to lap dancers' opportunism and idleness, therein drawing from the repertoire of stereotypes the middle class used to articulate its distinction from the working class (men and women) and women prostitutes (Mosse 1996: 5; Skeggs 1997: 46-47). They also contrasted the glamour associated with the consumption of a sexier femininity for pleasure to the vulgarity of women practising erotic dances for work.

Yet, pole dancers' positioning as respectable subjects is spatially and socially situated, and holds meaning only within the overwhelmingly homosocial space of the pole dance school. Indeed, I showed that most women who shifted from

teaching or consuming pole dance for pleasure to performing it professionally in mixed entertainment venues (e.g. discos), lamented feeling consumed by their audience as erotic workers – i.e. lap dancers and image girls, both metonyms of the whore. At the same time, such paid work contributed to some young women's self-reliance, as this work enabled them to pursue higher education in a context characterised by increasing economic precarity and cost of living.

To discuss the meanings of these findings, which locate pleasure and desire at the intersection of the spheres of consumption and (erotic and sex) work, I sought to unravel the class-based hierarchies of women's worth embedded in, and reproduced by, contemporary 'striptease culture' (McNair 2002), whose glamour fuels the commercial success of practices like pole dancing (Owen, 2012: 84; Brents & Hausbeck, 2010: 9; Holland & Attwood, 2009: 166). Firstly, I used Bourdieu's notion of 'taste' to unpack the role of class in shaping morality-laden hierarchies of worth between and amongst consumers and workers of different sex-related practices: from the erotica/pornography distinction (Philpott & Ferris 2013: 201; McNair 2002: 52); to the media's juxtaposition of the sexually liberated middle-class woman and the white trash slut (Attwood, 2006: 10-11); to the hierarchies of respectability that cut across the sex markets, especially since the entry of the middle classes as workers in some niches, while street sex works remains stigmatised and criminalised (Bernstein 2007a). Secondly, I used Beverly Skegg's ethnography on white British working-class women in north-west England (1997) to discuss the pleasures associated with the glamour of contemporary striptease culture. Skeggs showed how glamour provided working-class women, who have been historically othered by the middle-class ideology of respectability through sexuality, a means of dis-identifying from their social class without forfeiting the pleasure of desirability (*ibid.*: 110).

Consistent with these scholars, I suggested that the pleasures women consume in performing a more heterosexually desirable femininity partially reflects their desire to partake in the glamour of contemporary striptease culture, identifying with its celebrities. However, in shifting from the position of consumers of a

practice to that of workers providing sexualised entertainment, women experience the stigmas persistently labelling these latter, highlighting the class-based hierarchies of women's worth that striptease culture relies on and reproduces.

Yet, women do so in a context of economic precarity, in which their 'erotic capital' (Hakim 2011) is a cost-effective, profitable economic asset; a key resource to rely on in pursuit of their social and/or spatial mobility aspirations.

Therefore, I engaged with feminist scholarship debating women's agency in prostitution/sex work along dichotomies juxtaposing coercion and choice. I especially took issue with feminist abolitionists, who deny women's agency by pointing to the coercion of forms of structural violence, such as poverty (MacKinnon 2011: 274). Consistent with UK scholarship on student sex workers (see for example: Sagar et al. 2015: 22; Sanders & Hardy 2013: 16), I showed that all Italian and migrant women erotic workers I interviewed (i.e. image girls and lap dancers) considered their jobs to be flexible and cost-effective means for supporting themselves while pursuing their studies. Other women reported engaging in erotic or sex work intermittently, across different stages of their lives; for example, to cope with economic insecurity in-between jobs or to supplement a main income. Moreover, as I discussed throughout Chapters 4 and 5, for young migrant women travelling West-ward for work, lap dancing jobs constitute their near only means to reside legally in Italy. Consistent with scholarship on migration and sex work in Western European countries (Agustìn 2007: 40; Andrijasevic 2010: 74; Garofalo Geymonat 2010: 231), migrant women and M2F sex workers reported that working as their racialised, respectable counterpart – i.e. the cheap, self-less and caring *badante* (care worker) – was the only accessible alternative.

This chapter concluded by suggesting that women's agency continues to unfold within oppressive structures, wherein gender, class, colour, and nationality affect social positioning, means of livelihood, and welfare. Nonetheless, as discussed in Chapter 5, women articulated many reasons why their job was meaningful, and refused the victim or the sexual object label.

Respectability and its abjects: racialised desire and homophobia

In **Chapter 4**, I unravelled the intersection of race and sexuality underlying women's articulation of their positioning as respectable feminine subjects. In fact, when describing their customers, all pole dance entrepreneurs and teachers discursively conflated lap dancers and 'foreign' (i.e. non-Western migrant) women, racialising respectability and its counter – i.e. the whore stigma. This happened in a uniformly white space; a point also observed by other scholars analysing women's pole dancing (Donaghue & Whitehead 2011: 454; Whitehead and Kurz 2009: 231). Yet, such whiteness was fractured along racialised lines drawing hierarchies of women's worth on the basis of nationality. This held true also in the erotic and sex market niches I observed, where, amidst the overwhelming prevalence of whiteness, migrant women and M2F workers occupied the cheapest and most stigmatised positions.

In the wake of Anne McClintock's analysis of prostitutes as a group of social abjects that Western industrial imperialism ambivalently needed and despised (1995: 72), I unravelled the meanings of these findings through a genealogy (Foucault 1984: 6) of Italy's prostitution laws, highlighting the role of such laws in making Italy a respectable – i.e. heterosexual and white – nation. This entailed looking at the function of prostitution throughout Italian colonialism and imperialism. Indeed, by opening the chapter with an image of an imperial brothel price list, which I saw hanging on the wall of a popular restaurant owned by a left-wing woman activist, I wished to pinpoint the breadth of contemporary Italy's affect and lingering nostalgia for the (now lost) brothel, as well as its chronic omission of responsibility for its colonial and imperial past (Ben-Ghiat 2006; Donno & Srivastava 2006). Furthermore, Italy is also the country cradle of the Catholic Church, and hosts its global seat, whose influence on the moral and legal disciplining of sexuality – from marriage and divorce (Pollard 2008: 35-36) to abortion (Internazionale 2014) – has always been very influential. Hence, such investigation highlighted the Church's role in enabling Italy's long lasting attachment to regulationism. To undertake such genealogy,

therefore, I read extensively academic literature describing the disciplining of prostitution by some Western European states – such as the UK, France and Italy – during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Walkowitz 1980; Corbin 1985; Gibson 1999; Bellassai 2006), as well as in Medieval Europe and the Papal State (Rossiaud 2013; Ferrante 1987, 1998). Moreover, I engaged with scholarship analysing Western countries' use of sexuality and race as devices of rule in their colonies and/or metropolises (McClintock 1995; Mosse 1996; Stoler 1997; Hyam 1998; Nagel 2003; Sorgoni 2003).

I analysed the intersection of race and sexuality underlying the notion of respectability in contemporary Italy, and of the role of prostitution laws in constructing Italy as a respectable (i.e. heterosexual and white) nation, through a three-tiered argument.

Firstly, I argued that Italian nationalism has a special, affective relationship with regulationism. This relationship began with the birth of the nation state itself and lasted for a century, longer than in any other modern Western European (nation) state. It was not until the threshold of the 1960s, when its US-boosted economic miracle began, that regulationism was discarded. Yet, this special relationship periodically resurfaces as nostalgia for the 'lost brothel', as attested by Italy's current position in favour of a return to regulationism amidst an EU consensus on the Swedish model. Against this backdrop, I interpreted Italian women's racialisation of respectability partly as a legacy of the Italian state's century-long policing of women's sexuality, and partly as a reflection of contemporary xenophobia and homophobia. In fact, the most visible sex workers (i.e. street-based) are migrant women and M2F transgender. In this context, popular demands to 'clean the streets' and reopen brothels have become coterminous with making the nation 'respectable' again.

Secondly, I interrogated the overwhelming whiteness characterising pole dance schools in relation to the racialised hierarchies of desire and despise underlying striptease culture (McRobbie 2009: 87), and the history of Western colonial encounters with African, American and Asian people more broadly. I explored the Western construction of a racialised temporality that frames women's

sexuality along a continuum: from black women's primitive promiscuity, which attracts Western men's fascination and despise (Magubane 2001; Nagel 2003); to the white prostitutes in the metropolises, who were conceived as 'white negroes' (McClintock 1995: 56); to the white, chaste and asexual Western women, the apex of modernity (Lyons & Lyons 2011). Subsequently, I elaborated the concept of 'exotic value' to describe the different, race-inflected assemblages of desirability and despise that reproduce these hierarchies of value by juxtaposing whiteness and blackness in contemporary Western erotic and sex markets (Law 2012; Brooks 2010; Rivers-Moore 2013; Miller-Young 2010). I interpreted the whiteness prevailing among erotic and sex workers, in the niches I observed (night clubs, street sex work), as an indicator of Italian men's deeply racialised desire for whiteness. Such desire was actively cultivated during Italian imperialism through racial laws and policies criminalising Italian male settlers' sexual contact with native black women (Goglia & Grassi 1993: 281; Sbacchi 1985: 190).

Whiteness can also have an exotic value, however, as shown by a white Italian sex worker who occasionally performed Eastern European-ness to enhance her desirability for male customers. Amidst the fragmentation of whiteness along racialised lines, I suggested that Italian pole dance entrepreneurs and teachers' discursive purification of their practice from lap dancers and migrant women can be read as an indicator of what I termed, 'whitestreaming'. This term describes the racialised implications of the process of entering the Western mainstream, which requires a practice's whitening, and was developed through analysis of the processes undergone by many other sensual dances throughout the twentieth century: initially practised by Blacks and Latinos, whom Whites considered intensely sexual, dances had to be 'sanitised' in order to be accessible to and consumed by Whites (Hanna 2010: 226).

Thirdly, I sought to unravel the meaning of the Catholic Church's steadfast position of not objecting to regulationism (Tatafiore 2012: 176; Bellassai 2006: 156-8; Garofalo 1956: 93) in a country where its influence on women's sexuality has always been particularly forceful. Many Italian women, in fact, lamented the

suffocating influence of the Church, which they saw bearing responsibility for Italy's lagging behind other Western countries in terms of sexual liberation and modernity, and thereby reproducing the racialised temporality earlier discussed. Others, feared being stigmatised as whores due to their divorcee status.

At the same time, Italy is also the only Western country that does not recognise any form of same-sex union (Lipka 2015; CNN 2015); yet, homosexuality has never been explicitly criminalised as sexual deviance in Italy as it was in Protestant countries like the UK and Germany (Mosse 1996). Such a paradox, hinting at the unspeakable nature of non-heterosexual sex, led me to dialectically interrogate Italy's nostalgia for the lost brothel and its opposition to same-sex unions. Acknowledging the Papal State's enforcement of early versions of regulationism in the Middle Ages (Rossiaud 2013: 102; Ferrante 1987; Zaffanella 2008) and its century-long politics of the 'lesser of the two evils' (Rossiaud 2013: 2), I eventually suggested that the Catholic Church conceives the prostitution of women as a tool to cultivate men's heterosexual orientation, and safeguard heteronormativity. Hence, I argued that Italy's standalone position for a return to regulationism and against same-sex unions partially mirrors the homophobia of the Catholic Church, and its persisting influence on the country's legal disciplining of sexuality.

Within such a context, I argued that the feminist abolitionist position on the violence intrinsic to prostitution – as a gendered activity reliant on the reproduction of a dichotomy juxtaposing women as victims and men as their oppressors (MacKinnon 2011; Pateman 1988) – is flawed by its heteronormative bias. Hence, it overlooks the significance of male and LGBTQI sex work (Sagar et al., 2015: 35; Minchiello et al. 2012: 270; Phoenix 2009), and women's emerging consumption patterns of erotic and sexual services sold by both men (Gigolò 2015b) and women (Goldhill 2015). Highlighting the multiplicity of forms of exchanging and consuming sex – a field for the pursuit of further research – can contribute to nuancing the discussion on (not only) women's agency in sex work beyond binaries juxtaposing their gendered

oppression by men. More precisely, such research would compel one to look at the contradiction, which some Italian sex workers articulated, between late capitalism's drive to seek pleasure in consumption (Appadurai 1996: 82-83) and increasing economic inequality and precarity.

In **Chapters 3 and 4** I analysed the gendered, sexualised, class-based and racialised othering processes underlying Italian women's articulation of their position as respectable feminine subjects. In **Chapter 5**, I moved on to explore the tensions characterising women's heteronormative subjectification, as articulated by women abjectified by respectability, i.e. Italian and migrant erotic and sex workers.

Bearing with the relationality of being

In **Chapter 5**, I explored how women whose job entails taking up the position of the whore articulated their subjectivities, amidst an ambivalent aura of desirability and despise, fun and psychological burden, pleasure and pain. I began by showing how, in describing their job, Italian and migrant women erotic and sex workers elaborated multiple metaphors of separation between their bodies and themselves, their work and their intimate sphere, in anticipation of the gendered stigmas they knew to be labelled with. In so doing, many evoked the symbolic, albeit ambivalent and contradictory, protection encapsulated in the position of the respectable feminine subject. Most erotic workers erred between praising the value of their erotic capital and decrying its incompatibility with romantic love, voicing the pleasures and power intrinsic to their heterosexual desirability and lamenting their unfair stigmatisation as unworthy whores. Lamenting Italy's gendered and racialised employability patterns, all migrant women and M2F workers stressed the sacrifices they endured in pursuit of their personal aspirations, often encompassing caring economically and affectively for their beloved dependents (their children and/or parents). At the same time, they expressed pride in their determination to both pursue their dreams despite difficult working conditions, which were exacerbated by the stigma attached to their job, and refuse to work as their

socially valuable (i.e. respectable) but economically exploited counter – i.e. as home-based domestic and care workers (i.e. '*badante*').

I began discussing the meanings of these findings through sociological scholarship discussing affect, work, and embodiment (Wolkowitz 2006; Hardt 1999; Hochschild 2003). In particular, I focused on the paradigmatic clash around the possibility and significance of workers' articulation of boundaries to separate their work from themselves, the market and intimacy spheres. Such debate, in fact, lays at the core of the feminist sex wars' debate on prostitution/sex work. Here, the abolitionist camp argues that women prostitutes sell themselves, because in selling access to their bodies, they alienate from that which makes them women in the first place – i.e. their biological, sexed body (Pateman 1988: 207, 216). Women prostitutes lose their status as subjects and become object, hence abolitionists' use of the term 'prostituted' women (MacKinnon 2011). On the other side, sex workers and their allies stress workers' capacity to hold onto a separation between themselves and their work. Underlying both positions is the assumption of the possibility, and desirability, of maintaining a neat separation between the market and intimacy, as if, as Viviana Zelizer argued, they were 'separate spheres and hostile worlds' (2005: 20-21). Rather, as she convincingly argued, economic and intimate relations are entangled all across the spectrum of social relations. Their meaning is not determined by the presence/absence of money, nor related expectations of authenticity/commodification, but by what people invest and expect from the circulation of money (*ibid.* 27).

Consistent with Zelizer, I argued that alienation is not intrinsic to erotic and sex work; instead, women workers' articulation of the borders separating their work persona from themselves (e.g. their image from their body) represents a tactic for resisting the intersecting, multifaceted stigmas they experience at and because of their work. In fact, despite being socially stigmatised as whores or sexualised objects for male consumption, all Italian and migrant women erotic and sex workers expressed many reasons why their job was meaningful for them. For some, it was pride in the economic self-reliance their job enabled; for

others, it was the pleasure intrinsic to the higher consumption level they could afford. For migrant women and M2F sex workers, in particular, it was the determination to pursue social and/or spatial mobility against all odds, refusing to resign to a fate of poverty in their country of origin, while often attending to their dependents' welfare as the main economic providers. In contrast to the normative ideal of the separation of the market and intimacy spheres, I argued that women's engagement in erotic and sex work must be understood within the broader sphere of their personal aspirations and intimacy. Hence, such work engenders and conveys their 'cruel attachment' (Berlant 2010b) to living a normal life, and to emotionally and economically feed their affective bonds to their beloved dependents within a context characterised by increasing economic precarity and xenophobia.

Following on Wolkowitz's suggestion that, however fictive and tactical, borders between work and self are useful in resisting the capitalist encroachment on our subjectivities (2006: 26), I unravelled erotic and sex workers' multifaceted boundary-making strategies. Such strategies entail tracing borders in space, time, and on the body, as well as feeling different ways while performing the same act, such as kissing, with a customer or an intimate. Some women erotic workers claimed their capacity to fall in love at work (i.e. with a customer), their employment as whores notwithstanding, thereby resisting their stigmatisation as promiscuous women, who alienate their feelings for money. More rarely, although importantly, some sex workers described the relation with some customers as mutually pleasurable, leading to a consensual modification of the relation's meaning for both parties. Such pliability of boundaries does not indicate workers' loss of control – given that, as most work skills, learning processes also entail trial and error – but rather their capacity to mould boundaries according to what they deem best.

Finally, I used my own experience as a white Western aid worker in war-torn countries to question the ordinary alienation embedded in so-called respectable jobs, concluding my discussion of the class-based and racialised hierarchies of worth attached to different degrees and types of work-induced pain. I argued

that the separation between the market and intimacy, which is at the core of the stigma on prostitution, is a social construction that engenders a particular, rather than universal, viewpoint. More precisely, it reflects the viewpoint of white Western women and second wave feminists, whose prioritisation of gender over other axes of inequality mirrors the class and racialised privileges encapsulated in their positioning.

Conclusions

This dissertation argued that in order to understand the meanings women invest in their display and use of sexuality, whether for pleasure and/or work, it is necessary to overcome dichotomies juxtaposing sexual objectification and empowerment, dependence and autonomy, victimisation and agency, men-oppressors and women-victims. In contrast to the prioritisation of gender over other axes of inequality, this thesis suggested that women's subjectivities and agency - in pursuit of their personal aspirations, and/or to weave and feed their affective bonds - needs to be unravelled within a framework that acknowledges the weight of economic precarity and xenophobia, along with the connectedness (vs. separation) of the spheres of work and intimacy.

Although critical of the toxicity of current standards of feminine desirability, I argued in favour of acknowledging the affective and existential value of desirability. Embracing this, however, demands acceptance of the ambivalent entanglement of wholeness and separation, dependence and independence, desire and fear that characterises human subjectification (Benjamin 1990). Therefore, such entails acknowledging our vulnerability to losing our place as the object of desire of the other, whom we desire, rather than seeking refuge from this risk by disparaging desirability. Moreover, by conceptualising desire as a gift (Mauss 1966), I foregrounded desire's central role in texturing social relations, driving human beings towards one another, weaving and reorganising worlds (Berlant, 2012: 14).

In this thesis, I further argued that class is central to women's subjectivities. Some sought pleasure by consuming the glamour emanating from contemporary striptease culture within a context where the borders between

mainstream culture and commodified sex are blurring (Brents and Hausbeck 2010: 9-11). More broadly, women pursued their dreams of social and/or spatial mobility, as well as the means to fulfil their own and their dependents' economic security, amidst oppressive structures, wherein gender, class, colour, and nationality affect social positioning, means of livelihood, and welfare.

By looking at the dialectics between heteronormativity and homophobia, I unravelled the deep homophobia of the Catholic Church and its forceful influence on the moral and legal disciplining of sexuality in Italy. Here, women's subjectification remains severely constrained by heteronormativity, and within the wife/whore binary. Hence, women's consumption of pleasure activities, such as pole dancing, also conveys their yearning to retrieve the power of their sexuality, which 'good' women have been forced to abject in exchange for respectability and status.

Future research could expand on existing, pioneering scholarship on male and LGBTQI sex work, as well as on women's consumption of erotic and sexual services sold by both men and women. Such research would broaden the mainstream, abolitionist-informed debates on the regulation of sex work. In addition to giving visibility and worth to all sex workers, beyond their gender, sexuality, and/or racialised positioning, such research could also prompt a shift from the current personal-morality framework (i.e. the Swedish model) towards more redistributive policies, which could reduce both economic inequalities within and across (nation) states as well as people's exposure to economic precarity at different stages of their life trajectories.

Finally, archival research on the use of race and sexuality as devices of rule during Italian colonialism and imperialism, akin to those produced by scholars working on the British Empire and French colonies (Hyam 1998; McClintock 1995; Stoler 1997), could contribute to break through Italy's oblivion of and self-absolution for its historical responsibilities. In addition, such research could also interrogate and fight against the shocking rise of contemporary xenophobia.

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Annex I. List of interviewees and persons mentioned in the dissertation

Part I: list of people interviewed and quoted in the dissertation

| Name (<i>alphabetical order</i>) | Profession and other essential information | gender | nationality | age | Ch. |
|---------------------------------------|---|--------|-------------|-----------|---------|
| Carla | Pole dance entrepreneur, teacher and performer. | F | Italian | Early 30s | 2, 3 |
| Demi | Lap dancer at the <i>Spice & Roll</i> night club. Higher education student. | F | Russian | Early 30s | 3, 5 |
| Diana | Pole dance student. | F | Italian | teenage | 1 |
| Eleonora | Pole dance teacher and performer. Former acrobatic stripper. | F | Italian | Mid 30s | 2, 3, 4 |
| Federica | Pole dance teacher and performer. | F | Italian | Early 30s | 1, 2, 4 |
| Fiona | Lap dancer at the <i>Spice & Roll</i> night club. | F | Romanian | Early 20s | 5 |
| Filomena | Mother of Diana, a minor pole dance student. | F | Italian | over 40 | 1 |
| Floriana | Pole dance entrepreneur. | F | Italian | Late 20s | 2, 4 |
| Francesca | Pole dance entrepreneur, teacher and performer. | F | Italian | Early 30s | 2, 4 |
| Gianna | Human Resources manager of the <i>Spice & Roll</i> , a night club. | F | Italian | late 40 | 1, 3, 5 |
| Kate | Image girl (sit-in). Higher education student. | F | Ukrainian | Early 20s | 1, 3, 5 |
| Heather | Pole dance teacher and performer. Higher education student. | F | Italian | Early 20s | 3 |
| Kyla | Indoor sex worker. | F | Italian | late 40s | 3, 5 |
| Lina | Lap dancer at the <i>Sexy Moon</i> night club. | F | Italian | Mid 30s | 5 |
| Lola | Oriental dance teacher and performer | F | Italian | 18-30 | 1 |
| Lucia | Pole dance entrepreneur, teacher, performer. | F | Italian | Late 30s | 4 |

| Name (<i>alph. order</i>) | Profession and other essential information | gender | nationality | age | Chapte r(s) |
|------------------------------------|---|-------------|-------------|-----------|----------------|
| Maha | Image girl (sit-in). Higher education student. | F | Italian | Early 20s | 4, 5 |
| Magda | Pole dance teacher and performer. | F | Italian | Early 30s | 2 |
| Maria Pia | Image girl (blend-in). | F | Italian | 50 | 4, 5 |
| Milena | Lap dancer at the <i>Sexy Moon</i> night club. | F | Spanish | Mid 30s | 3 |
| Mimi | Lap dancer at the <i>Sexy Moon</i> night club. | F | Romanian | Early 30s | 5 |
| Mirca | Pole dance entrepreneur, teacher, performer. Former acrobatic stripper. | F | Italian | Early 30s | 4 |
| Monica | Image girl (sit-in and blend-in), pole dance student and higher education student. | F | Italian | Early 20s | 1, 2, 3 |
| Nadia | Anchor-woman of the <i>Sexy Moon</i> night club. | F | Italian | Late 40s | 3 |
| Nicola | Pole dance student. Martial arts trainer. | M | Italian | Late 20s | 2, 3 |
| Pia Covre | Co-founder of <i>Comitato per i diritti civili delle prostitute</i> . Former street sex worker. | F | Italian | Over 50 | 3 |
| Porpora Marcasciano | President of the Transsexual Identity Movement (MIT). Former street sex worker. | Transgender | Italian | Over 50 | 4 |
| Roberta | Indoor sex worker. | F | Italian | Early 20s | 3, 4, 5 |
| Tiffany | Lap dancer at the <i>Sexy Moon</i> . | F | Moroccan | Early 20s | 5 |
| Tiziana | Pole dance entrepreneur, teacher, performer. | F | Italian | Late 20s | 2, 3 |
| Uga | Pole dance entrepreneur and teacher. | F | Italian | over 40 | 2, 4 |
| Ulrich | Pole dance teacher and performer. Higher education student. | F | Romanian | Early 20s | 2, 3, 4 |
| Ursula | Indoor sex worker. | F | Italian | Early 40s | 5 |
| Zara | Pole dance teacher and performer. Higher education student. | F | Italian | Early 20s | 2,3,5 |
| Zeina | Lap dancer at the <i>Spice & Roll</i> . | F | Romanian | Late 20s | 5 |
| Zeza | Former lap dancer. Pole dance student. | F | Italian | 30-40 | 3 |

Part II: list of people interviewed but not quoted in the dissertation

| Name (<i>alphabetical order</i>) | Profession and other essential information | gender | nationality | Age |
|---|---|---------------|--------------------|------------|
| Barbara | Burlesque entrepreneur, teacher and performer. | F | Italian | 18-30 |
| Beatrice | Pole dance student. Martial arts trainer. | F | Italian | 18-30 |
| Brunella | Go-Go dancer; dancer. | F | Italian | 18-30 |
| Giulia | Aerial silk teacher. | F | Italian | 30-40 |
| Hilary | Sex toys promoter. Burlesque student and performer. | F | Italian | 18-30 |
| Miriam | Lap dancer at the Sexy Moon night club. | F | Italian | Early 20s |
| Ofelia | Burlesque entrepreneur, teacher and performer. | F | Italian | 18-30 |
| Teresa | Burlesque teacher and performer. | F | Italian | over 40 |

Part III: list of street sex workers mentioned in the dissertation

| Name (<i>alphabetical order</i>) | Profession and other essential information | gender | nationality | age | Ch. |
|---|---|---------------|--------------------|------------|------------|
| Christina | Street sex worker. | F | Spanish | Late 20s | 1 |
| Jenny | Street sex worker. | F | Serbian | Late 20s | 4 |
| Natalia | Street sex worker. | F | Serbian | Late 20s | 5 |
| Norina | Street sex worker. | F | Romanian | Over 40 | 5 |
| Nunzia | Street sex worker. | F | Nicaraguan | Early 20s | 5 |
| Stefania | Street sex worker. | F | Romanian | Mid 20s | 5 |
| Ulla | Care worker. Occasional street sex worker. | F | Ukrainian | 30-40 | 5 |

Part IV: list of any other person mentioned in the dissertation

| Name (<i>alphabetical order</i>) | Profession and/or other essential information | gender | nationality | age | Ch. |
|---------------------------------------|--|--------|-------------|-----------|-----|
| Daniela | Pole dance entrepreneur and teacher. | F | Italian | Mid 30s | 3 |
| Enrica | Lawyer. | F | Italian | Late 30s | 1 |
| Filippo | Researcher. | M | Italian | Late 30s | 1 |
| Flavia | Lap dancer at the Spice & Roll night club. | F | Romanian | Early 20s | 3 |
| Gina | Owner of a <i>trattoria</i> (restaurant). | F | Italian | Late 40s | 4 |
| Giorgio | Shop assistant and male stripper. | M | Italian | Early 40s | 5 |
| Giovanna | Anthropologist. | F | Italian | 70s | 1 |
| Giulia | Aspiring pole dance customer | F | Italian | Mid 30s | 2 |
| Luca | Employee in a catering firm. | M | Italian | Late 30s | 6 |
| Stefania | Former go-go dancer. Manager of the image girls' manager. | F | Italian | Over 50s | 4 |

Annex II. Grid of interview topics

This is the grid of open-ended questions I exchanged with my potential interviewees to inform them of the topics I hoped to address in the interview. I asked them to confirm in writing whether they were comfortable with the topics and signal when they preferred to skip something. The grid backbone is the same for all the groups of women workers I interviewed, but some questions are slightly different as they reflect job-specific peculiarities.

Pole dancers, burlesquers

- When and how did you first discover pole dance/burlesque?
- How do you feel practicing it?
- Who are your students, on average?
- Do you do other jobs in addition to teaching pole dance/burlesque?
- What do your friends/partner/parents think about pole dancing/burlesque?
- Were you ever criticized for practicing it? If so, by whom, and how did you react to it?

Image girls, go-go dancers, lap dancers

- When and how did you start working as an image girl/go-go dancer/lap dancer?
- Do you do other jobs in addition to this one?
- What do you like and dislike in your job?
- Who are your colleagues and customers, on average?
- What do your friends/partner/parents think about your work?
- Were you ever criticized for your job? If so, by whom, and how did you react to it?

Indoor sex workers

- When and how did you start working as an indoor sex worker?
- Do you do other jobs in addition to this one?
- What do you like and dislike in this job?
- Who are your customers, on average?
- What do your friends/partner/parents think about your work?
- Were you ever criticized for your job? If so, by whom, and how did you react to it?
- Did your work ever affect your intimate relationships?